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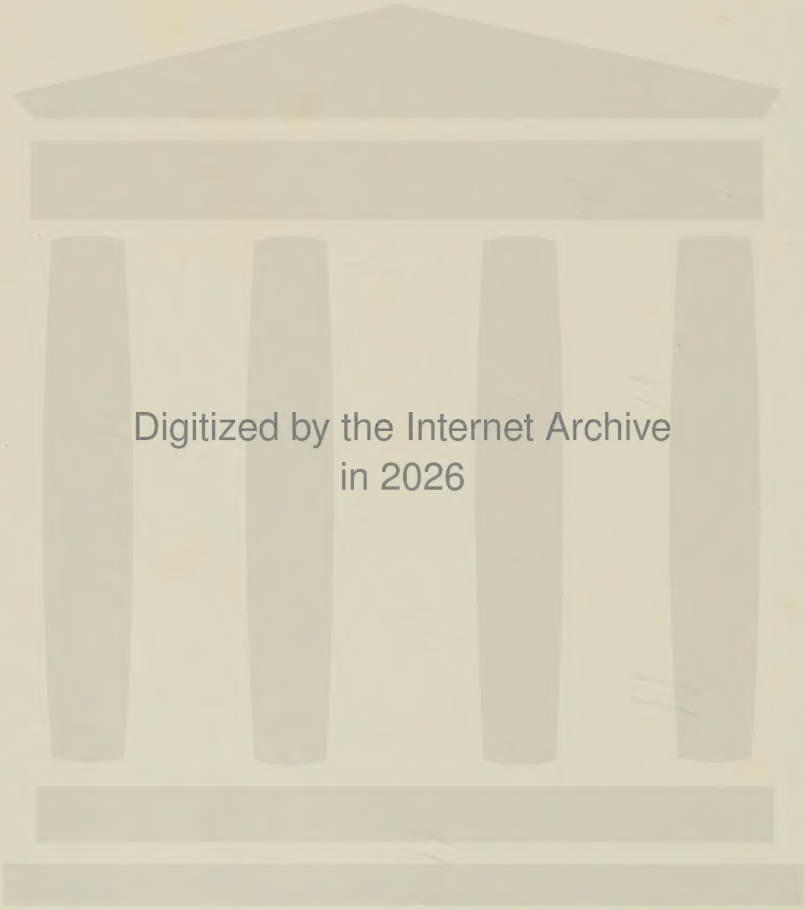
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JOSEPH CONRAD

AN APPRECIATION

BY ERNST BENDZ

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Preface.

The author of the ensuing pages is fully alive to their insufficiency in more ways than one. He is prepared to be told, among other things, that their somewhat fragmentary character is likely to detract from their usefulness as a critical appreciation of Conrad's work. But then they do not aim at being either comprehensive or exhaustive. They were written simply with a view to chronicle the phases of an intellectual experience and to justify an estimate founded on nothing more pretentious than a feeling of deep admiration and a sense of temperamental affinity. Thus various omissions and reticences will explain themselves. If certain aspects of the subject are dwelt upon in a cursory fashion, if this or that famous novel or story is hardly more than mentioned, the reason lies not in ignorance or carelessness on the writer's part, but in a certain lack of responsiveness for which he alone is to blame. It follows that, unlike Mr. Richard Curle's excellent monograph, the present essay addresses itself chiefly to readers already familiar with Mr. Conrad's writings, who will be pleased, perhaps, to find in it some echoes of their own past emotions.

Oct. 1922. *E. B.*

IT IS A MATTER OF FREQUENT EXPERIENCE to the student of literature that while some distinguished poets or novelists fail, for some reason or other, to impress us with an intimate sense of their own personality and do but loom indistinctly behind the abstract excellence of their writings, there are others, more fortunate, that happen to be gifted with a faculty of identifying themselves in some recondite way with their works and of gaining, as it were, the private affection of their readers. I am not here referring to that relation of exclusive affinity which may be observed between some thinker or artist, who to the world at large may mean little or nothing, and a limited coterie with whom alone his words acquire a peculiar profundity of meaning. But there are writers of a broader outlook and more eclectic sympathies who know how to endear themselves to our hearts, without relying for their appeal upon our rarer moods or idiosyncrasies of taste. We have all of us, for instance, among our contemporaries some favourite author or other to whom, quite apart from our recognition of his literary merits, we feel instinctively attracted by what we divine in him of personal charm, of knowledge of life, of a true human touch. Among all those, creators of poetry or of fiction, to whom we turn for our benefit or pleasure,

there will always be one or other for whom we reserve a tenderer love and more delicate appreciation — not because he embodies with greater skill of pen this or that ideal, but for his humour, his pity or his insight. Genius, which in the case of some great men appears to us in the light of an estranging and brilliant accident, marking them off as beings self-centred and apart, with a life and with laws of their own — genius itself, no matter of how fine or rare a quality, in this friend of ours will assume, as it were, a familiar and well-known aspect that inspires confidence and calls for love. Indeed, such is the ascendancy of a profound humaneness, kindliness, tact and wisdom that we may not even always be aware how far the pleasing sensation of such a perfect harmony of intercourse is due to a purely aesthetic enjoyment or to intellectual satisfaction. For just as it is in the nature of every deep and strong affection to minimize the frailties, and to magnify the ideal proportions, of whatever being or thing it centres upon, so in yielding to the fascination of the man behind the writer, we are apt to overrate the absolute value of words or ideas which to us, and at that particular moment, may convey an infinity of meaning, and, vice versa, to make light of shortcomings to the gravity of which, in less responsive moods, we ourselves are sufficiently alive.

And here lurks a pitfall for the critic. On no other occasion will he find that »real estimate» of literature of which Matthew Arnold once spoke as the only true one, in contradistinction to the »historical» and the »personal» estimate, more difficult of achievement than in the case of an author who has conquered his secret allegiance and enlisted the sympathies of his heart. Put to the task of applying to the work of one in whose favour he knows himself to be thus prejudiced, the

criteria of real and lasting excellence, he will have to be on his guard against all manner of exaggerated feelings and judgments. And in this he will succeed but on condition of keeping under due restraint his own personal likings and loathings, a thing not always easy or pleasant, yet one not altogether devoid of compensations. For as every disinterested exercise of our mental faculties carries with it its own reward in our sense of its nobility or usefulness, so the literary critic may derive from a dispassionate examination of a favourite author no mean enjoyment, through the mere fact of his knowledge of the more than ordinary difficulties of the task. Nor is that all. For as it is easier to be generous than to be just, and (as somebody has said) affection so often »reduces the iron stylus of justice into a vague flourish, that she writes what seems rather like an epitaph than a criticism», what rarer or more exquisite tribute even to those whom we love and admire is there than truth, and truth alone?

Now happily there are not wanting cases in which the difficulty experienced by the critic in conciliating his personal fondness for some writer or other with that fairness of judgment and freedom from bias which are the very condition of his function, is singularly relieved by the attitude of that writer himself. Beyond the number of those professional wielders of the pen who minister to the public need of a cheap and convenient form of intellectual amusement, each generation of readers will be conscious of the presence among them of a few — a very few — writers who from their at once dignified and sober conception of their calling, their earnestness and reverence for truth, might be expected to claim even of admirers to be taken at the valuation of a fair and impartial estimate, and whose dispassionate,

though not unfeeling, outlook would seem to solicit a like moderation in their critics. It is a matter for dispute whether an age like the present, in which the standards appear to be lowered by the tremendous growth of the spirit of advertisement, owns a just proportion of such writers, the true upholders of the traditional dignity of literature. As for the man of genius who forms the subject of the present study, no reader having a full knowledge af his works could entertain the least doubt as to his belonging to the élite, to that small number of writers of exceptional power who have added a characteristic and durable feature to the collective physiognomy of the literature of our time, and who by their sincerity and truthfulness are alone worthy of attention on the part of a Criticism that aims at something beyond a mere chronicling of the passing tastes and humours of the day. The following pages will have missed their purpose unless they be found to realize, in their modest way, those very qualities, in dealing with an author of whose writings they are so eminently significant.

Before entering upon an examination of Conrad's work in its leading aspects, a few words of comment may be made on the well-known fact that, previous to his adopting the career of a novelist, our author served in the British Mercantile Marine as sailor, officer and commander for nearly twenty years.

That in Conrad's case the tie between life and literature has been of paramount importance, needs no further emphasizing, affecting, as it does, not only the subject-matter, but the quality and tone of most of his stories. It is curious to note, however, that the circumstance which naturally accounts for the personal and reminiscent

character of these has met with both sympathy and indifference on the part of his critics. Having been remonstrated with by some reviewer or other for not being sufficiently »literary,» he makes the following illuminating declaration, braving the danger of becoming »permanently imperfect in the eyes of the ineffable company of pure aesthetes»: — ». . . a man who never wrote a line for print till he was thirty-six cannot bring himself to look upon his existence and his experience, upon the sum of his thoughts, sensations and emotions, upon his memories and his regrets, and the whole possession of his past, as only so much material for his hands.» (»A personal Record,» Preface).

It would be difficult for readers not themselves belonging to »the ineffable company of pure aesthetes» to question the perfect common sense of this line of self-defence, just as the attitude which it aims at rejecting is bound to strike them as unfair and shallow. Viewing life from a less narrow angle than the amateurs of beautiful sensations, and labouring under no extravagant notions as to the exclusive superiority of authorship among the forms of intellectual effort, they will appreciate the eminently sane and matter-of-fact tone, without a hint of professional presumption, in which the great writer and artist speaks of his own work, and will not dream of accusing him of not being literary enough for dwelling now and then, in a mood of wistful retrospect, amongst the memories and incidents of his strenuous sailor's past. On the contrary, to such readers there is something both natural and moving in the intimate and personal character of those stories in which he has tried, »with an almost filial regard to render the vibration of life in the great world of waters, in the hearts of the simple men who have for ages traversed its solitudes, and also that something sentient

which seems to dwell in ships — the creatures of their hands and the objects of their care.»

Moving, yes — and natural. For no man can get away from his own past. We are all of us the products, more or less, of our accustomed occupations and daily surroundings. We are perpetually refashioned and remoulded by them in a thousand, obvious or subtle, ways. They leave their indelible marks on our character and will-power, they determine our sympathies and interests, they tinge our sensibility with their peculiar atmosphere. Even when a man enters within a different and novel range of life and social influence, something of his old existence and ways of feeling still clings to him vaguely. It is not surprising, then, that Conrad, having spent the better part of a lifetime on board ships, in the company of men affiliated more or less closely to that common great concern, the Sea, should still exhibit, after long years of separation, some traces of his past allegiance to a taskmistress of so exacting and domineering a temper. I do not wish to labour the point by going into details. It is clear, however, that not only in his general outlook and turn of mind, but in his methods of literary work as well, does Conrad show the influence of his early vocation. There can be no doubt, that the fidelity and precision with which the recollections and impressions of his sea life are rendered years afterwards are due, in a measure, to the piously retained instruction of a calling in the adequate fulfilment of which the habit of watchful attentiveness and strictness of verbal statement form so necessary an ingredient. No doubt, too, the promptings of a long familiarity with the ways of the sea count for something in his attitude of quiet detachment and his moods of musing discursiveness. In the old days of sail craft, life upon the high seas was not adverse to the development

of a speculative bent of mind. Alone with himself and the great elementary powers, and with no petty considerations of time to press upon him, the man of reflective temper was forced back upon himself and impelled to humour his leanings towards reverie and absentmindedness. Or to quote from the author himself: — »The solitude of the sea intensifies the thoughts and the facts of one's experience which seems to lie at the very centre of the world, as the ship which carries one always remains the centre figure of the round horizon. (»Chance»).

As for the writer's affection for the element that had fostered him, his stories afford abundant evidence of its lasting tenderness. Recalling his elated feelings on taking over his first command, he writes: — »I discovered how much of a seaman I was, in heart, in mind, and, as it were, physically — a man exclusively of sea and ships; the sea the only world that counted, and the ships the test of manliness, of temperament, of courage and fidelity — and of love.» (»The Shadow-Line»). The same devotion breathes in the following lines: — »It's true that the sea is an uncertain element, but no sailor remembers this in the presence of its bewitching power, any more than a lover ever thinks of the proverbial inconstancy of women.» (»Chance»). Finally it may be remembered that in »The Mirror of the Sea» — very likely the most penetrating, subtle and attractive book ever written on the subject by a man himself of the craft — Conrad has registered more explicitly his indebtedness to the sea, its men and its ships, for much that has gone to make him what he is.

Now although Conrad has undoubtedly remained, in a sense, »a man exclusively of sea and ships,» and though his faculty of intuitive grasp and minute observation of physical phenomena may never have achieved a

greater triumph than in that astounding picture of a hurricane, »Typhoon,« he is a writer of too versatile a genius for his power as a story-teller to assert itself solely, or even pre-eminently, in his treatment of subjects relating to the sea or to sailors. In some of his finest stories the sea is not even mentioned. It is not only during the silent watches on starlit seas or in the sultriness and blaze of Eastern riversides that a man may attain to a steeled tranquillity of heart, or that his experience of the hard facts of life may become tempered by compassion and humour. Writing another kind of books in another language, away somewhere in his own native Poland, Conrad, knowing men of a different stamp and of different pursuits, but still knowing them, would have had as many opportunities to indulge that taste in marginal note and aphorism which forms so prominent a characteristic of many of the books he did write. When he says somewhere: — »... your imaginative people swing farther in any direction, as if given a longer scope of cable in the uneasy anchorage of life,« he employs a mode of expression that comes natural to a man familiar with the things of ships and the sea. But it requires no special maritime training to voice the conviction that »it is only women who manage to put at times into their love an element just palpable enough to give one a fright — an extra-terrestrial touch.« Neither is tramping a ship's deck for twenty years the shortest way to the discovery that »business men are frequently as sanguine and imaginative as lovers.«

It must indeed be held a question of individual liking whether we prefer one of the sea stories, such as »The Nigger of the *Narcissus*« or »The Shadow-Line,« or a »tale of the seaboard« like »Nostromo,« or an »island tale« like »Victory,« or whether we decide in favour of

the stories dealing with the Nihilist movement. It would be difficult to maintain that Conrad has shown less keenness of insight or narrative power, or an inferior literary skill, in any one of these subjects than in another. »Typhoon,« »Almayer's Folly,« »Under Western Eyes,« as representations of a particular phase of life, are equally worthy of admiration, though diversely so. Whether laid in some large city in our own part of the world, or removed to a miserable rajah-ruled pirates' nest up some obscure Eastern river, or comprised within the frail and narrow limits of a tramp-steamer beating her way through the China Sea, the scene confronts us with a spectacle not always conveying the same »moral,« yet identical in imaginative interest and truth to life.

An artistically perfect blending in them of Romance with Reality, the rendering, by the methods of realism, of a unique vision of the universe as reflected in a romantic temperament, is what constitutes the peculiar fascination and power of Conrad's writings.

It being the business of what we define, somewhat vaguely, as Romance to create a mood of detachment from our actual surroundings, our customary ways of thought and feeling, to lend wings to the spirit of adventure latent somewhere in most of us, the considerations impelling the writer of fiction to devise for his dreams and imaginings a background of remote or foreign scenery, are as obvious as they are legitimate. »Si l'on veut nous dire une belle histoire, il faut bien sortir un peu de l'expérience et l'usage.« (Anatole France).

In using as a setting for his earliest stories the distant and, in a literary sense, still undiscovered section of the earth's surface with which the chances of his life had made him personally familiar, Conrad was not the first imaginative writer to recognize the advantages of an

exotic milieu. But it may be reasonably questioned whether any modern novelist has made us realize more forcibly how far a story of passion and adventure may be dependent for its effect on a framing which, by its very novelty and strangeness, lends a strong suggestiveness to the plot itself, and its characters and incidents. This holds true no less of the shorter tales, like »The Lagoon« or »Karain,« than of »Almayer's Folly« and its sequel, in all of which the narrative element derives a peculiar significance from a definite environment of external conditions and moral atmosphere.

The strange, far-off world of Conrad's discovery may be defined geographically as »the region of the Indian Ocean with its off-shoots and prolongations north of the equator even as far as the Gulf of Siam.« Within this extensive area, however, the actual scenery varies as much as do the characters and their circumstances. We may be beating down the night-enshrouded coast of Cochin-China in a homeward-bound schooner, keeping up a ghostlike conversation with a runaway murderer stowed away in our cabin, or sit listening in a shady hotel-garden to the rambling talk of some shrewd old sea-dogs. We get a glimpse of the bustling seaport-towns, the roadsteads thronged with the shipping of all the nations of the earth, the straight, dusty avenues blazing in the hot, stagnant air, the billiard-rooms and eating-houses with their clientele of harbour-officials, clerks and ship-masters, the disreputable slums with their grovelling, fetid humanity of every race and faith and colour. Or we find ourselves in the fever-haunted interior of one of the big islands, up some river winding its sinuous and sluggish course between the perpendicular and gloomy walls of impenetrable forests, in the very heart of the wilderness, our sole companion perhaps some

decrepit individual hailing from our own part of the world, and dropped there by a freak of destiny. Or again we are treated to the sinister effect of a lurid tropical sunset, shedding its funereal rays on some rude basaltic rock in mid-Ocean, as if in mock celebration of the obscure human tragedy enacted there.

No matter, however, where our author leads us, these tales of the Far East (after all the most significant portion of his work and thus, in a way, representative of the rest) impress us, in an almost equal degree, with a sense of veracity and life. Not a few of them were written years after the actual experiences and impressions on which they are founded, yet they all retain somehow, through their dominant mood of musing retrospect, the freshness and flavour of the initial thrill and authentic emotion. However, this is perhaps a thing more easily felt than analysed. To say that their life-like effect arises from a felicitous conjunction of qualities not commonly found together, in an ample and equal measure, — from an aptitude for minute observation subserving an intuitive grasp of character and a remarkable gift of atmosphere, — would be a little like paying ourselves with words, as the French say. Still this is so. And perhaps there is no better proof of the faithfulness of Conrad's imaginative reconstruction of Eastern life than the fact that he makes us accept as a matter of course the presence, in certain well-defined surroundings, of individuals wholly outside the range of our own experience, and recognize the intimate consistency of ideas and actions which, unless conceived in their necessary relation to a definite social and moral environment, would baffle our comprehension. Our very real sympathy with creatures like Almayer or Aïssa is inseparable from our belief in their reality. Bams and his associates (»Because of

the Dollars») are a decidedly unconventional set of characters, to use a mild expression, — wide as poles asunder from all the rest of our fictitious acquaintances; yet they are *true*, as once seen, or heard of, and vividly remembered by the author. As we read about their doings, they cease to be merely remote and weird, and they arouse our feelings of horror, indignation or pity by what is simply real and human about them. The intricate and subtle workings of the Malay mind involve mysteries not easily gauged by a Westerner, the emotional idiosyncrasies of that fiercely passionate race are equally remote from ours; yet figures like Lakamba and Babalatchi capture our interest, not by their mere picturesqueness, but as the living embodiments of the peculiar world in which they dwell and breathe, and the strange case of obsession, significant of a half-barbarous mentality, described in »Karain,» is not merely strange, but tragic and deeply moving, because the superstitious impulses and feelings determining the sufferer's attitude are made intelligible and clear even to the European mind. The very horrors perpetrated by the murderous trio in »Victory» lose some of their startling, almost inhuman ferocity and appear less improbable when seen in their due relation to a world of which the existence of a place like Schomberg's hotel and »concert-hall» forms a notable, if undistinguished feature.

Thus there slowly spreads before our vision a universe unknown before, immense and strange, yet marvellously real and life-like, a Realm of Romance, full of lovely things and enchanting sights, holding out to us, on our first approach, as once to the author himself, »a whispered promise of mysterious delight;» but a world, too, of sinister spell and evil influence, contemptuous of life, heedless of morals, as we conceive them, tainted

with the crudities and ugliness of an imposed civilization, engrafted on native vice and Eastern rascality. Of all this — of the thousand things named and unnamed that go to the framing of a human society, within its setting of determinant physical conditions — we are able, thanks to Conrad's visualizing genius, to conjure up in our mind a vivid and resplendent image, and to form, as it were, a synthetic idea.

To define a writer who knows how to invest his rendering of life with so wonderful a character of reality, as a *realist* sounds like a tautology. However, there often attach to these sort of catch-words certain wrongly implied meanings, and so the term, as used with reference to Conrad, calls for a few words of explanation.

The realism, or »naturalism,» of Flaubert was taken to suggest the »impassibility» of the writer, the absence in the work of art of the artist's personality, betrayed by no inflection of voice or peculiarity of tone, nor by the personal intervention of the author in his story. Later on, Zola and his adherents found it a convenient word to express the methods of a »scientific» art supposed to exhibit life with something of the completeness and minute accuracy of a camera picture. In neither of these rigorous and narrow meanings is the term applicable to the work of Conrad. His general attitude is no more that of Flaubert (whose influence is, however, discernible in his writings) than his methods are those expounded and practised by the school of Zola. The doctrine of Zola (which was simply the paradoxical expression, amplified into a theory, of his own remarkable aptitude for methodical and painstaking observation and constructive talent) is long exploded. Nobody any longer believes in, or pretends to act up to, the notion that Art should hold a mirror up to Nature, reproducing

with equal and impartial fidelity great things and small on its perpetually changing surface. It is a notion that has no foundation in what is humanly feasible or even desirable — a notion embodying, in fact, a radical misconception of the very essence and genius of literary art. For in trying to reproduce or interpret even an infinitesimal portion of actual life, the artist must needs make some kind of selection or simplification. He will have to re-arrange things, leave out, tone down or emphasize, bring about an artificial scheme of shades, colours and proportions that shall be true both to life and to his own self. The success and degree of perfection of any literary work aiming at an effect of realism is essentially determined by this process of selection and of re-creation. Indeed, it is by his fine gift of discrimination, as much as through the quality of his workmanship, that the imaginative writer reveals himself an *artist*.

A writer of artistic temperament and strongly individualized taste like Conrad would hardly be expected to share the fallacy of a Zola. Whatever his shortcomings, they do not result from his having wilfully limited his freedom of self-expression for some crotchet of the intellect or purely theoretical ambition. »Liberty of imagination,« he says somewhere, »should be the most precious possession of a novelist. To try voluntarily to discover the fettering dogmas of some romantic, realistic, or naturalistic creed in the free work of its own inspiration, is a trick worthy of human perverseness which, after inventing an absurdity, endeavours to find for it a pedigree of distinguished ancestors. It is a weakness of inferior minds when it is not the cunning device of those who, uncertain of their talent, would seek to add lustre to it by the authority of a school .... It is in the impartial practice of life, if anywhere, that

the promise of perfection for his art can be found, rather than in the absurd formulas trying to prescribe this or that particular method of technique or conception.» (»Notes on Life and Letters»). Conrad's tales of the romantic adventurers and traders of the Great Archipelago, though forming together a kind of disconnected imaginative biography of a generation of beings that belong already to the past, have nothing even vaguely reminiscent of a pretended »natural and social» history of the species.

And how about the precept that, to achieve a truthful representation of life, the novelist must shut himself out of his work and refrain from every judgment, in his own person, on the conduct or feelings of his characters? If this theory be true — and it has the authority of a few very great artists — neither Conrad nor any of those Russian novelists of whom he reminds us in many things will be fitly described as a realist, in the sense of a faithful interpreter of the lives and actions of real men and women. The mere mention of names like Tolstoy, Dostoievsky or Turgeniev shows the absurdity of such an assumption. No works of fiction written with a view to render life such as it is, simply and straightforwardly, in its vastness and its variety, its misery and its splendour, could excel the masterpieces of any of those three in powerful and thrilling realism. Yet their writings are intensely suggestive in every line of the personality of the author, and permeated with the breath of some great, dominant passion, or doctrine, or half-mystic belief, occasionally expressed in asides of a personal character, or in introductory or appended remarks enforcing the argument or pointing the conclusion of a story. This note of humaneness, this element of personal feeling, in the great Russian realists has been finely

praised by Oscar Wilde: »Russian writers are extraordinary. What makes their books so great is the pity they put into them. You know how fond I used to be of »Madame Bovary,» but Flaubert would not admit pity into his work, and that is why it has a petty and restrained character about it. It is sense of pity by means of which a work gains in expanse, and by which it opens up a boundless horizon.» (Stuart Mason, »Oscar Wilde: A Study from the French of André Gide»).

As a matter of fact, the doctrine of the artist's impassibility, in its rigid acceptance, was as much a thing of convention and of fashion in its day as was the pursuit of completeness and photographic exactitude — one of those conceptions that come natural to the French mind with its liking for generalization and intellectual experiment. Not only does the fact of its having proved workable by a great artist (because suiting his individual genius) say nothing for its universal validity or fitness in the case of writers of an altogether different stamp, but it is easy to see that in believing himself detached from his own works, because he does not address the reader in the first person or interfere with the development of the plot, Flaubert was merely the victim of an illusion. For, after all, what can a writer of fiction impart to us but his own self — his own experience, his own dream of life, as rendered by his genius or his talent? »Madame Bovary» may be a true picture of French provincial life, but it is the truth as seen through a peculiar and unique temperament. For all their monumental dignity and would-be aloofness of attitude, works like Flaubert's reveal the character of their creator as much by their note of intimate despair and profound pessimism as by the technical perfection and unmistakable flavour of their style.

The experimental type of novel as represented, in France, by Flaubert, Zola, Maupassant and others, and in England chiefly by George Moore, could offer no lasting attraction to a writer like Conrad. (An exception such as »The Secret Agent,» his nearest approach to the *genre*, does not prove much). With a detachment perhaps more real than Flaubert's, Conrad has much of the expansive temperament of the talker, a quality of which we find no trace in the works of the former. The peculiar charm of especially his later stories is largely due to the incomparable fluency and ease of the dialogue. These stories frequently assume the character of an informal *causerie*, a fictitious narrator being charged with the task of relating the whole, or part, of the incidents, interspersing his account with reflections and comments of his own, or exchanging cursory remarks with his supposed hearers. This quite natural tendency to drop into the modes and inflections of *talk*, involving of necessity a greater freedom of utterance and some unconventionality of attitude, — this, and a bent for musing discursiveness, growing with years, have determined together a style of narrative and a manner of composition that, while certainly serving as a medium for that ample survey of human conditions which we understand as Realism in art, are yet unconformable to any pattern or theory of a particular school.

It is probable that some readers may be disposed to feel that the effect of at least Conrad's longer tales is seriously impaired by an undue preponderance of the reminiscent and subjective element, and by his curious trick of showing things in refracted lights, as it were, and from varying optic angles. Indeed, the case of »Chance» and »Lord Jim» has been actually adduced in support of the notion that Conrad's genius does not lie in the

direction of story-telling at all! It is true that the fact of the events in both these stories being told us almost entirely in the words of Marlow, and with the interpretation put upon them by Marlow, does not make for simplicity or obviousness. But then the subject in both cases is neither obvious nor simple. One even asks oneself, in view of the extreme subtlety of the issues dealt with, especially in the former, whether stories of this kind could be at all written in another, more straightforward fashion. It all depends of course on the interest or value of Marlow's comments on his own text. As for these, it would no doubt be unfair to ask of readers who have adjusted their taste to the artistic level of Messrs. Rider Haggard or Anthony Hope, to find them anything but impertinent or wearisome. As a matter of fact, most of the criticism aimed at Conrad on the ground of his alleged deficiencies as a story-teller originates in a conventional or shallow view of the appropriate methods and aims of the art. They seem to forget, those critics, that to be able to appreciate a writer like Conrad, it is necessary to discard certain ideas of fitness or excellence gathered from the work of craftsmen of the calibre of those just mentioned, and that a novelist is not by definition a man who very kindly undertakes to help us while away the hours. To appreciate Conrad, we can no more leave out of account his vein of sententiousness and contemplative bias than such of his qualities as form part, in a more obvious sense, of his endowment as one of the great masters of fiction. In order to truly comprehend his genius, we shall have to envisage his knack of musing self-commentary, his discursiveness, not as a thing outside his art, but as that art itself in *one* of its aspects.

Let us start with a very simple instance: — »He ex-

perienced that irresistible impulse to impart information which is inseparable from gross ignorance.» An individual peculiarity is explained by a reference to a fact of (we are to believe) universal occurrence; characterization passes into aphorism. The following is a somewhat analogous example: — »He put his hand over his lips as if to keep back the words that wanted to come out in a surge of impulsive necessity, the outcome of dominant thought that rushes from the heart to the brain and must be spoken in the face of doubt, of danger, of fear, of destruction itself.» Here we are conscious of a sort of break in the sentence after the word »necessity» accentuated by the change of tense; what follows has the character of an illustrative remark of general bearing. In both of these passages the syntactic unity is preserved, the period being wound up with a phrase of aphoristic turn. We are made to pause for a moment, to reflect, but our attention is not really diverted from the facts of the story itself. The following is a slightly different case, the concluding part being actually disintegrated from the bulk of the sentence: — »It was the voice of madness, of a delirious peace, of happiness that is infamous, cowardly, and so exquisite that the debased mind refuses to contemplate its termination: for the victims of such happiness the moment of its ceasing is the beginning afresh of that torture which is its price.» Here too, however, the appended remark is felt to be by its very concision, not an irrevelant excrescence, but a formula of general experience bearing closely on the particular instance presented by the narrative.

Not always do the author's enlargements strike us as equally apposite or necessary. When he writes for example: — »Her hands slipped slowly off Lingard's shoulders and her arms fell by her side, listless, dis-

couraged, as if to her – to her, the savage, violent, and ignorant creature – had been revealed clearly in that moment the tremendous fact of our isolation,» this method of statement is not only a perfectly lucid, but a full and adequate rendering of the idea, calling for no further explanation or comment. The author need hardly have insisted. But he goes on, characteristically:

»of the loneliness impenetrable and transparent, elusive and everlasting; of the indestructible loneliness that surrounds, envelopes, clothes every human soul from the cradle to the grave, and, perhaps, beyond.» It is obvious that, while thus surrendering to the suggestive power of a passing mood of reverie, he has actually lost sight for a moment of the particular fact that gave rise to it.

Or take a somewhat more complex instance. I quote from »An Outcast of the Islands.» In Chapter IV, Part III, the narrative is resumed as follows: – »Lingard had never hesitated in his life. Why should he? He had been a most successful trader, and a man lucky in his fights, skilful in navigation, undeniably first in seamanship in those seas. He knew it. Had he not heard the voice of common consent? The voice of the world that respected him so much; the whole world to him . . .» Now to make perfectly clear to us the deep perturbation experienced by this man of boundless self-confidence and steadfastness of purpose, on being suddenly faced by a problem, at once practical and moral, the solution of which was not to be effected by a masterful off-handedness, the author not only premises a longish, introductory paragraph describing the firmness, the directness of aim, the contemptuous and unseeing self-pride that characterize most men of action, but on writing down the lines just quoted falls again

into a strain of musing generalities on the subject: — »... for to us the limits of the universe are strictly defined by those we know. There is nothing for us outside the babble of praise and blame on familiar lips, and beyond our last acquaintance there lies only a vast chaos; a chaos of laughter and tears which concerns us not; laughter and tears unpleasant, wicked, morbid, contemptible — because heard imperfectly by ears rebellious to strange sounds.» All of which is interesting enough in itself, but neither necessary nor conducive to lucidity.

In fact, the procedure is no doubt a little slow and involved and entails some strain upon the reader's attention. In a few cases the stories might have only gained by the excision of redundant matter, hampering the progress of events or blurring by over-subtlety the clear issues of an admirably conceived situation. But these must be regarded as exceptions. In reality, far from forming an adventitious element in his writings, Conrad's occasional digressions into meditation and aphorism, engendered by the intimate promptings of his mind and serving, in many instances, a deliberate artistic purpose, cannot be dissociated from his work without detriment to the whole or without injustice to himself. But for Conrad the dreamer, the moralist, the *raisonneur,* Conrad the narrator of thrilling adventures and analyst of intricate cases of conscience, would have been not only less curious and fascinating a writer, but an altogether different man.

How far the purely aesthetic appeal of his stories is inseparable from their quality of dreaminess and spiritual suggestiveness, we may best gather, perhaps, from a study of their interpretation of the phases and phenomena of the external universe.

Let us consider a moment the following passage: — »Those were the delights of his life, and he was unable to conceive that the moral significance of any act of his could interfere with the very nature of things, could dim the light of the sun, could destroy the perfume of the flowers, the submission of his wife, the smile of his child, the awe-struck respect of Leonard da Souza and of all the Da Souza family.» This idea of a man committing an action that not only would compromise fatally his social and family relations and estrange him from his fellow-creatures, but would debar him from intercourse with the very elements, would taint for him the innocent charm of a flower and tarnish to his guilty eyes the brightness of the sun itself — this idea is a significant one. Not merely because it emphasizes that belief in the preponderance of moral as against material fact to which every page of Conrad's gives eloquent utterance, but in its implied recognition of an intimate relationship of man with Nature, of their strange reciprocity of moods, of the mysterious and elusive parallelism between the fleeting instability of the one and the enduring permanence of the other.

More even than the fastidious exactitude of his renderings of actual externals, this responsiveness to the emotional appeal of things, this subtle tinge of transcendentalism, is what lends a peculiar significance to Conrad's delineations of scenery. It may be just a line, and it makes all the difference. »Near by, the eddies sighed along the reefs, the water soughed amongst the stones, clung round the rocks with tragic murmurs that resembled promises, good-byes or prayers.» Or again: — » . . . the calms of the coast, the flaming long calms of the equator, the unbreathing, concentrated calms like the deep introspection of a passionate nature, brooded awfully for

days and weeks together over the unchangeable inheritance of their children.» How many have known like Conrad how to render with an inspired and simple touch the baffling elusiveness of moonlit nights, the unfathomable splendour of the starry spaces, the unearthly charm of peaceful evenings mingling, with the sadness of parting, the memory of the long glorious day and the confident hope of reawakening? »There was something precious and soothing in the beautifully serene end of that expiring day, of the day vibrating, glittering and ardent, and dying now in infinite peace, without a stir, without a tremor, without a sigh — in the certitude of resurrection.» What is ostensibly nothing more than a statement of certain changes in the physical aspect of things, imperceptibly, as metaphor links itself to metaphor in a delicately hinted parallelism, becomes expressive of a pathos deeper far than any that may seem to us to attach to the mere accidents of light and air: it is Life itself that thus unrolls itself before our moved eyes — the wonderful cycle of our own days of toil and triumph drawing to its peaceful close.

The following is another example of this spiritualized conception of the visible universe: — »There is something haunting in the light of the moon; it has all the dispassionateness of a disembodied soul, and something of its inconceivable mystery. It is to our sunshine, which — say what you like — is all we have to live by, what the echo is to the sound: misleading and confusing whether the note be mocking or sad. It robs all forms of matter — which, after all, is our domain — of their substance, and gives a sinister reality to shadows alone.» The moon floating away forlornly in the clear midnight spaces above a chasm in the mountains, »like an ascending spirit out of the grave,» its sheen

descending »cold and pale, like the ghost of dead sunlight,» these are images equally familiar to our writer. Or he tells us of »the shadow of the outer darkness, the shadow of the uninterrupted, of the everlasting night that fills the universe . . ., the restless shadow that like a suspicion of evil truth darkens everything upon the earth on its passage.» No less charged with symbolism or interwoven with suggestive metaphors is this other passage: — »An immense cloud had come up running over the heavens, as if looking for the little craft, and now hung over it, arrested. To the south there was a livid trembling gleam, faint and sad, like a vanishing memory of destroyed starlight. To the north, as if to prove the impossible, an incredibly blacker patch outlined on the tremendous blackness of the sky the heart of the coming squall. The glimmers in the water had gone out — and the invisible sea all around lay mute and still as if it had died suddenly of fright . . . The night effaced even words, and its mystery had captured everything and every sound — had left nothing free but the unexpected that seemed to hover about one, ready to stretch out its stealthy hand in a touch sudden, familiar and appalling.» It will be realized by an attentive reader that the lurid impressiveness of that admirable piece of prose is due, not to its descriptive elements, but to the imaginative projection, into the sphere of physical happenings, ot those symptoms of oppression and suspense by which our nature anticipates and forewarns us against an impending danger.

I am not suggesting that Conrad embraces the doctrine of spiritualistic pantheism, or that he has ever been urging the possibility of the physical laws expressing anything but their own immutable rigorousness. In all his work there is scarcely a line or utterance that could be

cited in support of a similar assumption, and on one occasion at least he has taken the opportunity of warning his readers against this particular misapprehension. In an Author's Note to »The Shadow-Line,» waving aside the supposition that he had intended to touch upon the Supernatural in that story, he writes as follows: — ». . . . I could never have attempted such a thing, because all my moral and intellectual being is penetrated by an invincible conviction that whatever falls under the dominion of our senses must be in nature and, however exceptional, cannot differ in its essence from all the other effects of the visible and tangible world of which we are a self-conscious part. The world of the living contains enough marvels and mysteries acting upon our emotions and intelligence in ways so inexplicable that it would almost justify the conception of life as an enchanted state.» (»Notes on my Books,» 1921).

Man's sense of the mystery and terror enveloping his earthly existence need have nothing to do, and can have nothing to do, in this sober, modern view, with the vain imaginings of our latter-day occultism or a more or less articulate belief in an extramundane agency. Still a notion for which there would be no room in the intellectual order of ideas may be realized as a truth by the intuitive and creative vision of the artist and deck itself, in the eye of poet and dreamer, with a seductive illusion of certitude. And so with Conrad. In that eminently clear-sighted and well-poised mind there flowed, deep down, an imaginative and romantic vein too authentic and powerful to be quenched even by the unceasing claims and inevitable disenchantments, through a long succession of years, of a strenuous and toilsome calling. Amid the worry and routine duties of a seaman's life he remained responsive to the mystery

and wonder of the things and happenings with which he was called upon every day to deal in a professional and matter-of-fact way, never suffering himself to become engrossed by their mere sensuous aspect and obvious significance. The accidents of element or atmosphere, the ever-changing features of shore and sea, — these were to him things not only to be studied, made use of and mastered, in obedience to the unromantic claims of cargo-shipping or the injunctions of seamanship; they were subjects also for love and reverie, they raised the contemplative mind above the ephemeral and the commonplace, and ministered to its thirst for the infinite, they were suggestive of startling analogies, murmurous with subtle promptings, weirdly unreal. And so, when rendered through the medium of an art partaking as much of the introspective and brooding temper of the dreamer as of the soberminded exactitude and watchful patience of the sailor, the incidents and spectacles of nature came to be endowed (as somebody has observed) with »a kind of crooked vitality of their own,« and to live for us, in the emotion of the story, »as though they had an almost formidable influence on the course of events.« The »unexpected« hovering above that frail and lonely craft, »ready to stretch out its stealthy hand« in the gloom and suspense of the gathering squall; the flicker of an *expression* on the rugged, stolid face of things; the signs, the symbols, broadcast among the elements or processes around us, as of a mysterious and shadowy presence interweaving its influence for good or bad with the fates of men, their desires, their fears, their struggles — we, too, are made to feel them all, and in the thrill of our vicarious emotion pay them the supreme, if unostentatious, tribute of a passing shudder or a fluttered, awed surmise.

A peculiar interest attaches to those instances where some effect of natural scenery or elemental disturbance is brought in as actually foreshadowing the crisis in the development of a moral drama, or mirroring, in its appropriate casualness, the gloom and anguish of a tortured soul. A single phrase may convey an infinity of macabre suggestiveness: — »A pair of stewards in white jackets with brass buttons appeared on deck and began to flit about without a sound, laying the table for dinner on the flat top of the cabin skylight. The sun, drifting away toward other lands, toward other seas, toward other men; the sun all red in a cloudless sky, raked the yacht with a parting salvo of crimson rays that shattered themselves into sparks of fire upon the crystal and silver of the dinner-service, put a short flame into the blades of knives and spread a rosy tint over the white of plates. A trail of purple, such as a smear of blood on a blue shield, lay over the sea.« (»The Rescue«). It is but a line; yet how does it intensify our feeling of the whole situation and confirm the vague forebodings suscitated by the desolate wildness of the scene, the helplessness and forced immobility of the stranded pleasure-trippers, the startling appearance of a mysterious and uncalled-for helper! The looming tragedy is already prefigured by that lurid splash of red on the darkening sea.

Or note in the following passage in »Lord Jim« — relating to the last meeting between the hero and Marlow — how the gathering gloom of night, enveloping in its deep and silent softness all shapes and sounds and movements, adumbrates the approaching end — that death so curiously quiet and unresisting, almost a self-extinction, after all the adventures, the troubles, the triumphs; — »The sun, whose concentrated glare dwarfs the earth into a restless mote of dust had sunk behind the forest,

and the diffused light from an opal sky seemed to cast upon a world without shadows and without brilliance the illusion of a calm and pensive greatness. I don't know why, listening to him, I should have noted so distinctly the gradual darkening of the river, of the air; the irresistible slow work of the night settling silently on all the visible forms, effacing the outlines, burying the shapes deeper and deeper, like a steady fall of impalpable black dust.» Yet to the woman who loved him and to those dependent upon him his death was fraught with dire consequences, and so we are not surprised that the very heavens should have taken on an aspect of gloomy portent at the moment of his tearing himself out of the girl's arms to rush to meet his fate: — »She sobbed on his shoulder. The sky over Patusan was blood-red, immense, streaming like an open vein. An enormous sun nestled crimson amongst the tree-tops, and the forest below had a black and forbidding face. Tamb' Itam tells me that on that evening the aspect of the heavens was angry and frightful. I may well believe it, for I know that on that very day a cyclone passed within sixty miles of the coast, though there was hardly more than a languid stir of air in the place.»

It has been the aim of the foregoing pages to bring into prominence a few of the salient features of Conrad's work, as showing the influence of his racial idiosyncrasies, his early life and his temperament. Let us pass on to an examination of his writings in regard to their *narrative interest* — the importance of a creator of fiction being, after all, measurable mainly by this one thing: his skill in the delineation of his characters and in the management of his plots. As, however, most of his books

may be supposed to be fairly generally known by now, and excellent résumés of all but the very last may be found elsewhere,[1]) little more will be essayed here than a bare indication of their dominant traits, and a brief analysis of the motif of each story — of that »moral discovery» which, in his own words, should be »the object of every tale.»

Were we called upon to define, in the briefest manner possible, the very soul and substance of Conrad's stories, the word Romance would suggest itself as the only one sufficiently explicit and comprehensive: each of them embodies a scheme of romantic effect worked out with supreme subtlety and skill of art; his characters, taken in a body, are not only beyond comparison the most striking, the most original, the most fascinating, but the most romantic, in the whole of contemporary fiction. For who are the true romantics if not those who differ in some notable way from the common run of mortality — be it by a greater endurance or fortitude, or by a divine simplicity and unselfishness, or by the fine recklessness of their passions; or perhaps merely by a capacity of surrendering to their own chimaeras, by a peculiar facility for becoming the, smiling or tragic, victims of their own illusions — »of the illusions as restless as men; of the illusions faithful, faithless; of the illusions that give joy, that give sorrow, that give pain, that give peace; of the invincible illusions that can make life and death appear serene, inspiring, tormented, or ignoble?» And Conrad's heroes and heroines are all romantic in one way or another, romantic in their virtues as in their depravity, their weakness or their folly. Whether they

1) Richard Curle, »Joseph Conrad: A Study,» Kegan Paul 1914. Hugh Walpole, »Joseph Conrad» (in the »Writers of the Day» series), Nisbet & Co.

meet with failure or success, in a wordly sense, whether yet in the bloom of youth or canker-bitten by experience, whether of our own breed and culture or the half-savage children of strange, far-off countries; grotesque or touching, repulsive or pitiable, all, at some moment, rise to brave or to evade the conventional and settled order of things, and are seized with a desire to put into their lives an undreamt-of colour, a new thrill, a unique vibration. Each, at the appointed hour, awakes to realize that for him, or her, life holds some ecstasy of delight or sorrow, holds sins and punishments, ardours, hopes, deceptions, beyond the measure of ordinary beings. Theirs is that »Amour de l'Impossible« which »falls like a madness on many who think that they live securely and out of reach of harm.« They know the rapturous visions, the moonstruck reveries, of those who dwell with shadows. They walk among men and follow the ways of the world with eyes fixed afar and dream-enshrouded.

There is Almayer. True, there is not much of »romance« about the »peevish and suspicious fool« whose sole claim to distinction lay in the accident of his being the father of the beautiful Nina. Still the passion of outraged fatherhood lends him at the very end a touch of dignity and pathos. But the strangely inadequate title of the story says nothing about its real subject: the love of Dain and Nina. The author may have dealt with more complex problems of passion elsewhere, or sounded more troublous depths of the love-sick heart, but never again does he tell the tale of happy, youthful love. Among all his lovers these two alone, untarnished children of the wilderness, wise in their untaught simplicity and fearless self-assertion, are granted without stint the consummation of their desire, alone these are happy unto the end — happy with the love

that is man's but in the golden prime of his days. The elation, the frank sensuality of healthy youth, the seductive freshness of ripening girlhood, the reverie, the hot yearnings, the secrecy and excitement, the snatched felicity of nocturnal meetings, the full and deep fruition, the promise of enduring bliss — it is all here, in this Conrad's first and (many would say) finest story, in which there lingers an echo of that hymn in praise of life's priceless splendour whose notes are never again to sound from the author's pages.

I shall need no excuse for giving the following extracts, which render the spirit of the story more perfectly than any other passages of equal length, and convey so true a feeling of the tropics in their brooding calm and sensual lassitude, their mysterious enticement and exuberant growth of life: —

> And so they drifted on, he speaking with all the rude eloquence of a savage nature giving itself up without restraint to an overmastering passion, she bending low to catch the murmur of words sweeter to her than life itself. To those two nothing existed then outside the gunwales of the narrow and fragile craft. It was their world, filled with their intense and all-absorbing love. They took no heed of thickening mist, or of the breeze dying away before sunrise; they forgot the existence of the great forests surrounding them, of all the tropical nature awaiting the advent of the sun in a solemn and impressive silence.
>
> Over the low river-mist hiding the boat with its freight of young passionate life and all-forgetful happiness, the stars paled, and a silvery-grey tint crept over the sky from the eastward. There was not a breath of wind, not a rustle of stirring leaf, not a splash of leaping fish to disturb the serene repose of all living things on the banks of the great river. Earth, river, and sky were wrapped up in a deep sleep, from which it seemed there would be no waking. All the seething life and movement of tropical nature seemed concentrated in the ardent eyes, in the tumultuously beating hearts of the two beings drifting in the canoe, under the white canopy of mist, over the smooth surface of the river . . . .

His own boat was there anchored by a stone, and he stepped into it, keeping his hand on the gunwale of Nina's canoe. In a moment the two little nutshells with their occupants floated quietly side by side, reflected by the black water in the dim light struggling through a high canopy of dense foliage; while above, away up in the broad day, flamed immense red blossoms sending down on their heads a shower of great dew-sparkling petals that descended rotating slowly in a continuous and perfumed stream; and over them, under them, in the sleeping water; all around them in a ring of luxuriant vegetation bathed in the warm air charged with strong and harsh perfumes, the intense work of tropical nature went on: plants shooting upward, entwined, interlaced in inextricable confusion, climbing madly and brutally over each other in the terrible silence of a desperate struggle towards the life-giving sunshine above — as if struck with sudden horror at the seething mass of corruption below, at the death and decay from which they sprang.

»An Outcast of the Islands» strikes a much harsher note, and on the whole is less pleasing reading than the volume to which it is a sequel. Yet it is a story of rare grip and undeniable fascination. Conrad here tackles a subject to which he reverts in »An Outpost of Progress» and »Heart of Darkness» (the love-motif in these, however, being either absent or not brought to the foreground, while in »An Outcast» it is all-paramount): the subtle process of mental and moral deliquescence in an individual of Western origin, released from the trammels of civilization and exposed to the maleficent influence of a tropical environment. This subject, already touched upon in »Almayer's Folly,» is strikingly embodied in the love-affair of Willems and Aïssa.

It cannot be pretended that Conrad has been the first to utilize for a literary purpose the subject of an amorous relationship between a white man and a native woman of the tropics. It has been of old a favourite one with writers of a romantic inclination. None of these, however, who have either dealt with the theme in a more or less

conventional or vaguely sentimental style, or, like Pierre Loti, approached it somewhat in the spirit of a dilettantish globe-trotter in pursuit of emotions, can vie with Conrad, who has the advantage of drawing from a wider experience and more intimate knowledge of the actual facts. How far the incidents making up the plot of »An Outcast» and the atmosphere into which it ushers us are true to the real thing, the readers of the book may not be generally aware, by the way. Those interested in the matter will obtain some curious information in Mr. W. N. Willis' »Western Men with Eastern Morals,» which sets forth the inconveniences and dangers of illegal sex-relations between white residents in the East and coloured women. The woman of the East, we read in that well-documented little volume, »can better administer to his [the white man's] physical comforts than the white woman. The native woman is an adept at all the tricks of keeping her white lord in her meshes. She knows all the love potions that fire the sensuality of the blood . . . . But the real secret of the animal attachment many white men have for the black women in the East is that their blood is hotter than the white woman's. A half-caste girl, a saffron-skinned woman, or a pure black woman's blood runs at fever heat in her veins compared with the cold white woman. The heat creates passion that administers to the animal craving of the white man; hence his attachment to the girl of the East.» It is in the light of facts like these that one should read »An Outcast of the Islands.» For Conrad's story is the imaginative record of just such a fiercely sensual infatuation of a white man for a woman of alien race — of a violent and sudden sex attachment bound to end in tragedy, as in so many real cases, owing to the hopeless diversity of blood and the lack of true sympathy between the parties.

A fraudulent business-clerk finds himself established against his will in a remote native settlement, cut off from civilization and with no human companionship, save the unfriendly one of Almayer, to relieve the tedium of his life. One day, on a lonely forest path, he meets a beautiful and seductive Arab girl. The unexpected encounter sets astir within him a world of unknown desires and feelings: -- »He looked at the woman. Through the checkered light between them she appeared to him at once enticing and brilliant -- sombre and repelling: the very spirit of that land of mysterious forests, standing before him, with the vague beauty of wavering outline; like an apparition behind a transparent veil -- a veil woven of sunbeams and shadows.» And now between these two a love springs up, irresistible as death, unmindful of dangers and difficulties, a love unseeing, unthinking, that knows of no past and no to-morrow, rapt in the fevered enjoyment of its own distracting ecstasy. And the woman in return for the bestowal of her body possesses herself of the man's soul. She becomes to him »like the great sea to thirsty men -- a never-ceasing torment, and a madness.» In vain he struggles with himself. Beguiled beyond the bounds of his unlawful ambitions, he degrades himself into a tool of his secret enemies, plays false to his friend and benefactor and betrays his own kin.

But one day the charm will work no longer. Disillusioned, cloyed with passion, the lover rouses himself from his voluptuous lethargy and tries to shake off his fetters. Harking back, he conceives a profound pity for his own abused self and bitterly regrets having »made a fool of himself.» The spell once broken, his hard, narrow soul has no room for compassion, let alone for gratitude or loyalty, for the woman who has refused him

nothing. In the revolt of his senses his love turns into loathing and contempt. In that mind unappeased and terror-haunted, half-crazed already with unavailing regrets and fears, one desire remains uppermost with the obsession of an *idée fixe:* that of escape at any cost. But for him there is no pardon and no going back. A timely bullet releases him from a life robbed of endeavour, of liberty, of forgetfulness, of every vestige of human decency, robbed even of the consolation of its dead love. Divested of the glamour of a romantic infatuation and reduced to a victim of his own morbid imaginings and soul-murdering apathy, Captain Lingard's ex-protégé claims our interest in exact proportion to his, wholly passive, share in events henceforth beyond his control.

The pity we must deny her mean, ungenerous lover we cannot withhold from Aïssa. Rejected by all, braving the curses of her father, she abides faithful to the choice of her heart. Distrusting the testimony of her senses, the warning cry of her woman's instinct, she still believes in his strength and valour, clinging to him as though he were indeed »a refuge from misery, from storm, from weariness, from fear, from despair.» But it is at the very last that her love achieves its greatest victory — that over herself. She, the daughter of mighty chieftains and great war-lords, abases herself before the low-bred wife of the man who vilely forsakes her, and before the accursed and despised mother of the child that ought to have been hers, tragically proclaims herself a servant and a slave. Silencing the call of her blood, mastering her anger and her pride, true to the memories of the past, she consents to her lover's departure and with a gesture of sublime despair flings to him her parting gift of his life, which he, poor broken-witted bungler, refuses to take and so comes in at last for his reward.

Among the »Tales of Unrest,» belonging to the same period, two, located in the same environment, and imbued with the same spirit of strongly flavoured exoticism, deal again with the subject of love as a thing of high romantic adventure — with the difference, however, that the leading characters are all Malays.

»Karain» is a powerfully told story of a strange case of obsession. A young Malay girl of rare beauty and of noble parentage leaves her home and goes to live in the house of a Dutch trader. Their position growing dangerous, they flee together in the Dutchman's prau and vanish across the seas. Matara, the girl's brother, and Karain, his chosen friend, set out at once in pursuit of the runaways. For months, for years, they roam about the wide archipelago in fruitless search, knowing neither rest nor peace, braving the dangers of the jungle, toiling for hire in the fields, begging their food in the cities of the white, exposed to ill-usage, sickness, starvation, to sneers and mockery, selling for a handful of rice the carved sheaths and jewelled hilts of their krisses — but keeping the blades. For they never desist, and the thought of the offending woman and her seducer never leaves them. On their lonely wanderings, by the light of the camp-fire, they talk of their vengeance. And then a strange thing comes to pass: Karain begins to be haunted by visions of the woman on whom their talk runs for ever, and whom he has seen only once with his eyes. She speaks to him tenderly in the hush of night, smiles at him, consoles him, steals his heart away from him.

. . . I saw her every day — always! At first I saw her head, as of a woman walking in the low mist on a river bank. Then she sat by our fire. I saw her! I looked at her! She had tender eyes and a ravishing face. I murmured to her in the night. Matara said

sleepily sometimes, »To whom are you talking? Who is there?» I answered quickly, »No one» . . . It was a lie! She never left me. She shared the warmth of our fire, she sat on my couch of leaves, she swam on the sea to follow me . . . I saw her! . . . I tell you I saw her long black hair spread behind her upon the moonlit water as she struck out with bare arms by the side of a swift prau. She was beautiful, she was faithful, and in the silence of foreign countries she spoke to me very low in the language of my people. No one saw her; no one heard her; she was mine only! In daylight she moved with a swaying walk before me upon the weary paths; her figure was straight and flexible like the stem of a slender tree; the heels of her feet were round and polished like shells of eggs; with her round arm she made signs. At night she looked into my face. And she was sad! Her eyes were tender and frightened; her voice soft and pleading. Once I murmured to her »You shall not die,» and she smiled . . . ever after she smiled! . . . She gave me courage to bear weariness and hardships. Those were times of pain, and she soothed me.

Then, at last, they find the pair together, outside their house, smiling and happy. Matara quickly gives directions for rushing them. Karain is to kill the man. Bursting out from a thicket, Matara leaps at his sister with uplifted arm. Karain beholds the enchantress of his dreams, the secret companion of his weary wanderings. She seems to murmur in his ear pleadingly. Something obscure and irresistible takes place within him. He takes his aim, pulls the trigger, and kills Matara. Smiling at the woman, Karain waits to hear from her lips words of recognition, of gratitude, of tenderness. She turns her back upon him, declaring she has never seen him. Then he flees from the sight of men, hiding his remorse and his misery in the depth of the forests, where the stars cannot stab him with their joyous lights — but not alone! The avenger has become a victim. The ghost of the betrayed and murdered friend never leaves him. Asleep or waking, till his dying day it will be always

there behind him, reproachful and silent, and nothing will ever drive it from his side for a while but the presence of the white unbelievers, to whom the dead speak not.

However thrilling the character of its morbidly romantic hero and his strange destiny, and however curious the insight it affords us into the twisted mentality of the Malay, with its proneness to vague superstitions and ferocious hatreds, the story of Karain and his ghostly visitations cannot be matched with »The Lagoon» for condensed suggestiveness of atmosphere or exquisite pathos. True, it is a tale of untimely destroyed happiness, and like »Karain» and »An Outcast» it ends on a mournful note, but it is not so bitter nor so cruel. Karain's glowing love-dream is but a web of illusions torn to shreds by the contact with reality — the fantastic creation of an hallucinated brain unsettled by privations and hardships. Willems' brief intoxication bears within it the seed of its own destruction. Arsat and his bride are granted a kinder fate. The deep forests shelter in their perfumed solitude these two, consumed by the burning ecstasy of an ever-renewed desire. Life stands still around them. Uncounted the months glide past. And when at length death robs him of his love, the agony of his bereavement somehow finds solace in the quietly faced conviction that his own life is henceforth accomplished, and there remains but one thing between him and death: to avenge his brother, slain while aiding the lovers in their flight.

Let us pass on to what is, in the opinion of some of Conrad's critics, perhaps still his most perfect work — »The Nigger of the *Narcissus*.» The present writer cannot share this high estimate, which, it is only fair to add, however, is one likely to be endorsed by the author himself, since he has actually told us somewhere that it

is »the book by which, not as a novelist perhaps, but as an artist striving for the utmost sincerity of expression,» he is willing »to stand or fall.» The reasons are not far to seek why, even after the accomplishment of the greater part of his life-work, Conrad should still reserve his artistic preference for a book which, although admirable, has neither the structural amplitude nor the intellectual scope or maturity of his later writings: of all his tales of the sea, »The Nigger of the *Narcissus*» is the one which gives the fullest account of his own experiences of a sailor's life, and which possesses the entire freshness and forcibleness of a *de visu* record. It undoubtedly presents a more varied and comprehensive vision than any other of his books of the kind of life to which he is after all mainly indebted for his knowledge of human nature, his peculiar philosophy and some of his most fortunate inspirations as a story-teller. Its pages embody, not perhaps his most eloquent and moving, but his earliest and most unpremeditated recognition of his debt of gratitude to the men who had been the companions and the moulders of his youth and manhood. In »The Mirror of the Sea,» in »Some Reminiscences,» in »Typhoon,» in »The Shadow-Line» and elsewhere, he goes over the same ground again and voices the same obligation, but in none of these later works does he convey the same suggestion of things intimately known and seen, or so revel in the stored-up memories of a vanished past.

In fact, the task which Conrad proposed to himself to achieve in this story — that of making us hear and feel and *see* things — could not have been more brilliantly performed. As a faithful and illuminating picture of life on board an Ocean-going merchant-vessel in the old days — the weary round of daily duties, the strict

discipline, the sudden scares, the hardships and dangers, the little world of the fore-castle with its easy comradeship of men of every age and nation living together in a forced intimacy of acts and feelings for a brief space of weeks, only to be dispersed to every quarter of the globe never to meet again — »The Nigger of the *Narcissus*» stands without a parallel. The successive scenes detach themselves with marvellous vividness and neatness; only an eye-witness could have written the following: — »The noise increased. Little Belfast seemed, in the heavy heat of the forecastle, to boil with facetious fury. His eyes danced; in the crimson of his face, comical as a mask, the mouth yawned black, with strange grimaces. Facing him, a half-undressed man held his sides, and, throwing his head back, laughed with wet eyelashes. Others stared with amazed eyes. Men sitting doubled up in the upper bunks smoked short pipes, swinging bare brown feet above the heads of those who, sprawling below on sea-chests, listened, smiling stupidly or scornfully. Over the white rims of berths stuck out heads with blinking eyes; but the bodies were lost in the gloom of those places, that resembled narrow niches for coffins in a whitewashed and lighted mortuary.»

The characters stand out with an amazing and life-like emphasis. Take Donkin, »the independent offspring of the ignoble freedom of the slums,» an »ominous survival testifying to the eternal fitness of lies and impudence»: — »He stood with arms akimbo, a little fellow with white eyelashes. He looked as if he had known all the degradations and all the furies. He looked as if he had been cuffed, kicked, rolled in the mud; he looked as if had been scratched, spat upon, pelted with unmentionable filth .... and he smiled with a sense of security at the faces around. His ears were bending down under the weight of his battered hard hat. The torn tails of his

black coat flapped in fringes about the calves of his legs. He unbuttoned the only two buttons that remained and every one saw he had no shirt under it. It was his deserved misfortune that those rags which nobody could possibly be supposed to own looked on him as if they had been stolen. His neck was long and thin; his eyelids were red; rare hairs hung about his jaws; his shoulders were peaked and drooped like the broken wings of a bird; all his left side was caked with mud which showed that he had lately slept in a wet ditch.»

All the moods of sky and ocean are depicted with a delicate sensitiveness, fullness of detail and visual effect that place this story on a level immeasurably above that of the ordinary tale of the sea, whether it is the perfect stillness and repose of an Indian roadstead, the poignant contrast between the uproar of infuriated elements and the inscrutable serenity of a starlit firmament, or the unearthly vision of the white, tall-masted ship gliding along with all her sails set on the placid moonlit waters in the immense hush of the universe: — »On clear evenings the silent ship, under the cold sheen of the dead moon, took on the false aspect of passionless repose resembling the winter of the earth. Under her a long band of gold barred the black disc of the sea. Footsteps echoed on her quiet decks. The moonlight clung to her like a frosted mist, and the white sails stood out in dazzling cones as of stainless snow. In the magnificence of the phantom rays the ship appeared pure like a vision of ideal beauty, illusive like a tender dream of serene peace. And nothing in her was real, nothing was distinct and solid but the heavy shadows that filled her decks with their unceasing and noiseless stir; the shadows blacker than the night and more restless than the thoughts of men.»

All these things are beyond praise, but they are not the most significant part of the book. It would be a mistake to conceive of »The Nigger of the *Narcissus*» as pre-eminently a marvellous piece of realism, or to regard its brilliant passages of description as anything but incidental to that study in collective psychology that underlies the plot of the story (such as it is), and in which the author's genius displays itself most subtly.

In the book (as the author reminds us) James Wait »is nothing,» in so far as his attitude remains passive throughout. At the same time, of course, he is everything, since the real interest of the story lies in the way in which the mere fact of his moribund condition and strange self-delusion affects the atmosphere of the forecastle and calls into play the idiosyncrasies of its inmates. From the first he arouses their mistrust, and the vague suspicion of a treacherous Death lurking in the living carcase of the consumptive nigger casts its unholy spell on their simple, stolid souls; they fear him and keep out of his way: — »He seemed to hasten the retreat of departing light by his very presence; . . . a black mist emanated from him; a subtle and dismal influence; a something cold and gloomy that floated out and settled on all the faces like a mourning veil. The circle broke up. The joy of laughter died on stiffened lips. There was not a smile left among all the ship's company. Not a word was spoken. Many turned their backs, trying to look unconcerned; others, with averted heads, sent half-reluctant glances out of the corners of their eyes. They resembled criminals conscious of misdeeds more than honest men distracted by doubt; only two or three stared frankly, but stupidly, with lips slightly open.»

But in that narrow world no one can live isolated for long from his fellows; there soon springs up between the

invalid and the rest of the crew a sort of intimacy in which curiosity, contempt and aversion are strangly mingled with sheer human compassion: — »We served him in his bed with rage and humility, as though we had been the base courtiers of a hated prince, and he rewarded us by his unconciliating criticism. He had found the secret of keeping for ever on the run the fundamental imbecility of mankind; he had the secret of life, that confounded dying man, and he made himself master of every moment of our existence. We grew desperate, and remained submissive.» Meanwhile the perturbing influence emanating from their moribund shipmate infects the whole crew, unsettling their peace of mind, interfering with their occupations and their leisure, tugging at last at the very bonds of discipline: — »We began to hate him for making fun of us. All our certitudes were going; we were on doubtful terms with our officers; the cook had given us up for lost; we had overheard the boatswain's opinion that 'we were a crowd of softies.' We suspected Jimmy, one another, and even our very selves. We did not know what to do. At every insignificant turn of our humble life we met Jimmy overbearing and blocking the way, arm-in-arm with his awful and veiled familiar. It was a weird servitude . . .» Half-unwilling accomplices in an extraordinary and sinister farce of self-deception, the men ultimately lose their hold on the common certitudes of life and suffer themselves to be demoralized by a mistaken sense of loyalty, a morbid recklessness of fellow-feeling: — »Through him we were becoming highly humanized, tender, complex, excessively decadent: we understood the subtlety of his fear, sympathized with all his repulsions, shrinkings, evasions, delusions — as though we had been overcivilized, and rotten, and without any knowledge of the

meaning of life. We had the air of being initiated in some infamous mysteries; we had the profound grimaces of conspirators, exchanged meaning glances, significant short words. We were inexpressibly vile and very much pleased with ourselves.»

Donkin's cowardly attempt upon the life of Captain Allistoun and the resolute attitude of the officers at a very critical moment clear the air and recall the men to a sense of their duty. But it is only the death of James Wait that finally disabuses his victims of what now appears to them, in a truer light, as »just common foolishness; a silly and ineffectual meddling with issues of majestic import.» The unrestful voyage draws to its close, and things again fall back into the light of common day, disturbed no longer by the shadowy presence of a cynical and peevish spectre.

The story is characteristic of Conrad's tendency to represent his heroes, whether constitutionally »normal» or not, as acting (or refraining from action, as the case may be) under the strain of some morbid exaltation of the mind or the senses, some deceptive illusion or *idée fixe*. The process of mental disturbance analyzed in »The Nigger of the *Narcissus*,» involving no high issues of passion or morals, strikes us by the subtlety of its symptoms rather than by its dramatic aspects. Yet the whole tale is steeped in an atmosphere of romance of a kind. In the memories of those rough and simple-hearted men the amazing episode will live on with the uncanny fascination of an immense and perplexing enigma. It had brought them face to face with a world of strange and complex impulses to which they had abandoned themselves with the unsuspicious credulity of their ignorant souls. They had been fooled and bullied, and they knew it. They had despised themselves for weak-minded

sentimentalists. They had been hovering on the verge of mutiny. But then, the glamour, the excitement of it all! For a fleeting moment they had indulged in that luxury of feelings which is the privilege of the happy and the spiritually rich on this earth. They had bathed in the genial warmth of their own fine devotion, of their superb unselfishness. They had skirted the border-land of the awful Unknown. In their obtuse and muddled way they had responded to the thrill of the mystery enfolding all things human.

The story of »Lord Jim» presents the same eternal antagonism between Dream and Reality, but as actualized in a life-drama of a far more elaborate and subtle character. Jim cannot be placed on a par with a rough ne'er-do-well like Willems: and he comes to grief in circumstances less damning to his moral nature and manly qualities, because acting on the spur of an overwhelming and sudden temptation. He was (in Marlow's words) »very fine; very fine — and very unfortunate. A little coarser nature would not have borne the strain; it would have had to come to terms with itself — with a sigh, with a grunt, or even with a guffaw; a still coarser one would have remained invulnerably ignorant and completely uninteresting.» Now this man, in whose moral and mental balance the good undoubtedly predominates, and who lacks neither ability nor courage, — this man, in one of those moments of supreme trial when something of our true nature is bound to come out fatally, has let himself be surprised into an action (the stealthy desertion of a ship believed to be sinking) which not only has utterly ruined his career and stamped him with the brand of incapacity and cowardice, but deprived him of that modicum of self-esteem and self-reliance without which a real man cannot live and breathe. In all this

part of the story, dealing minutely and a little disconnectedly with the episode of the »Patna» and the trial of her officers, there is little enough of »romance,» and as much as you please of incisive analysis, grimly humorous portraiture and crude flashes of colonial life. The romance comes in when, by an almost fantastic stroke of fortune, Jim is placed in a position not merely to achieve renown, consideration and influence as a white ruler among natives, but to retrieve in a measure, through the intimate conviction of his competence and usefulness, his lost self-respect.

This latter part of the narrative is full of thrilling matter, yet here again, as always in Conrad, not the actions and happenings as such, but their emotional significance, their bearings upon character, are what chiefly interests us. Here too, the chain of events runs parallel with a line of mental development, with the growth of an insidious and deadly illusion, with the gradual unfolding of an invincible resolve. Even the death of Jim impresses us more as the logical outcome of a moral condition than in its character of a tragic incident. Amid the scenes and pictures that bring the story home to us we never for a moment lose our feeling of what is, after all, the real subject: the hero's desperate struggle to live up to the shadowy and exalted ideal of conduct he has forged for himself for his rehabilitation. As for Jim himself, with all his fine sensibilities, his imaginative aspirations, he remains a little mysterious to the last; perhaps never more truly himself than in the moment when, calling upon Death for that final and conclusive proof of his valour and manhood which even the brilliant chances of a marvellous fortune denied that mind hankering for justification and for ever probing its own wounds, he tears himself »out of the arms of a jealous

love at the sign, at the call of his exalted egoism,» and passes from our eyes »like a disembodied spirit astray amongst the passions of this earth, ready to surrender himself faithfully to the claim of his own world of shades.»

The figure of Axel Heyst in »Victory,» presented under a cruder light and in a setting of somewhat melodramatic effect, is endowed with as true a quality of romance. His is again the case of a man so completely carried away and so dominated by an emotion that everything not relating to that emotion has no meaning for him. But whereas in »Lord Jim» we follow the losing struggle of earthly ambition and love, backed up by life's tenderest and strongest claims, against the haunting shadow of an evil memory, »Victory» tells us of the awakening and progress of a passion which, robbed of its object and living complement, turns quietly to Death for its relief.

Intelligent, cultured, earnest, with as great a delicacy of moral fibre as Jim, Axel Heyst, this son of a Swedish baron, acting as »manager in the tropics» for a European mining company as Utopian as himself, is among all Conrad's heroes perhaps the, humanly, most lovable. The idea of Fate having singled him out to perform the protagonist's part in a somewhat glaring and sordid drama, having as fellow-actors three professional sharpers and cut-throats, a rascally hotel-keeper and a more seductive than refined member of an itinerant ladies' orchestra, would have struck this aristocrat of accomplished manners and retired habits as little short of madness. Yet that is what happens. The distinguished frequenter of luminous and enticing shadows — »Enchanted Heyst» — actually steps out of his magic circle, in the unexpected and somewhat equivocal position as a champion of an unprotected and attractive young girl, and goes to hide on

a lonely island with the grateful object of his chivalrous care. A strangely assorted pair, yet soon locked in a union that death alone shall sever: she, all devotion and delight in the trustful surrender of herself to that man, in the very inflections of whose courteous and cultured voice she admires a superior being; he, the restless dweller among phantoms, who had imagined himself invulnerable in his system of vagrant seclusion, now touched to the quick by the woman's appeal to his protective and manly instincts, and enjoying the altered condition of things with a deep and quiet zest, and an eagerness to live very new to his experience.

But Fate has already gathered into her hands the unclean tools kept ready for their undoing. »Plain Mr. Jones« and his acolytes, after some preparatory attitudinizing, are ushered on to the scene. The effect of nightmarish wildness and horror of what follows baffles description. But out of the imbroglio of passion and plotting the figures of Heyst and Lena detach themselves, noble and unspeakably sad. Heyst preserving his serenity of manner and the grave politeness of his best »Heystian« tone under the torturing suspicions aroused in him by the discovery of Lena's supposed duplicity; the girl glorying in the dearly bought success of her enterprise and expiring with a smile of childish happiness — these are things not easily forgotten. Lena's dying confession, disclosing her share in the dark and complicated drama, clears up whatever doubts might have still been lurking in her lover's mind, and in these last fleeting moments they drain together the measure of pure felicity that the fragile prisons of our hearts will hold without breaking, and in the wordless ecstasy of a mysterious and perfect union renounce all earthly ties. For even then — and in response to what masterful and subtle

challenge, who shall say? — Heyst must have formed the resolve in which his own fastidious and romantic soul achieves its ultimate expression; his voluntary death, like the girl's fatal act of self-devotion, is simply the recognition of the indestructible fascination — of the *Victory* — of their common illusion.

In yet another great work of romance — his last — does Conrad revert to the scenes and localities of what he has called his »Malayan phase.» »The Rescue» is an achievement of somewhat delicate appreciation, having been planned and probably written in part exactly twenty years before the actual completion of the story. About his motives for laying it aside unfinished, the author says as follows: — »Several reasons contributed to this abandonment and, no doubt, the first of them was the growing sense of general difficulty in the handling of the subject. The contents and the course of the story I had clearly in my mind. But as to the way of presenting the facts, and perhaps in a certain measure as to the nature of the facts themselves, I had many doubts .... I saw the action plainly enough. What I had lost for the moment was the sense of the proper formula of expression, of the only formula that would suit.» (»Notes on my Books»).

We can only form a surmise of what the story would have been like if finished without interruption. Possibly the figures of Hassim and Immada, now relegated to the second plane, would have come out more prominently. Lingard, of course, must have been in it from the first, and so, too, the episode of the stranded cutter and its three passengers. Among the difficulties with which the author felt himself incapable of dealing adequately at the time (though he does not say so expressly), may very likely have been a feeling that a character like Mrs. Travers

was as yet beyond his grasp, or that he mistrusted his ability of mastering the relations between her and Lingard. Such as it is, the story is not without showing some traces of the delay imposed upon its completion, something of the exotic flavour of his early romances mingling itself with that subtlety in the presentation of complex moral situations which tends to become more and more the dominant trait of his work. Even so, »The Rescue» remains an achievement of imposing structure, equally enjoyable in the quality of its writing and in the emotional intensity of events that hold one spellbound to the end.

It is an interesting fact that while Conrad creates more and more finely organized types of femininity, his women have lost none of their mysterious fascination and sensual attractiveness. Endowed with the charm and prestige of an experienced and brilliant society woman, Mrs. Travers remains of the earth earthy – as true a daughter of Eve as any of her untamed and dusky sisters of the wilderness. Or else, how would she have cast a spell on that man of tremendous vitality and primitive instincts – Lingard? It may be doubted whether, in spite of his grasp of character and intuitive insight, the author's peculiar range of experience would have fitted him for a successful presentment of a nature like Mrs. Travers in the environment with which we would naturally associate her. Throwing her into a world the mere existence of which seems to herself a negation of all her previous life and accustomed notions and feelings, and bringing the perennial ascendancy of her sex to bear on the issues of an amazing adventure, he contrives an opportunity of studying her as she really is, divested of her fashionable appurtenances and the artificiality of conventional attitudes, while the very fact of

their social diversity imparts an added tinge of romance to her meeting with Lingard.

On a hurried reading, the story undoubtedly leaves behind it a slight sense of obscurity, the plot in itself being somewhat entangled. Perhaps we also get just a little too much of the sort of fastidious elusiveness of which the very paragraph introducing Mrs. Travers may be given as a specimen: — »On the other side of the deck, a lady, in a long chair, had a passive attitude that to Mr. d'Alcacer, standing near her, seemed characteristic of the manner in which she accepted the necessities of existence. Years before, as an attaché of his Embassy in London, he had found her an interesting hostess. She was even more interesting now, since a chance meeting and Mr. Travers' offer of a passage to Batavia had given him an opportunity of studying the various shades of scorn which he suspected to be the secret of her acquiescence in the shallowness of events and the monotony of a worldly existence.»

The crucial point, however, is whether we believe, or not, in Lingard's attitude all through, whether his renunciation of the love offered him is the very thing we had been expecting of that man of masterful temper and of so firm a hold on life's realities. One cannot help a suspicion, on laying the book aside, that a Lingard ending by carrying off his lady would have been, perhaps, no less consistent with the general psychology of the man and what we see and know of him. Or, in so feeling, are we merely victims to those »business-like instincts which a careful Providence has implanted in our breasts?» Is it only that »a solution by rejection must always present a certain lack of finality, especially startling when contrasted with the usual methods of solution by rewards and punishments, by crowned love,

by fortune, by a broken leg or a sudden death?» The point is debatable, and the ending, as I said, slightly bewildering. For why do Lingard and Mrs Travers part for ever? With every day that passes they are drawn more closely together in their efforts to see through and fight clear of the entanglements of an absurd situation. By all human evidence, they were made and destined for each other. She has no children, she does not love her husband, and every fibre in her woman's body cries out to him a pathetic appeal to take her. That she would have followed him, we have no doubt; not with an easy heart or without a hard fight with herself, but still she would have done the thing. Why, then, does nothing come out of it? Because — the author will have us believe — the peculiar nature of Lingard makes any other dénouement impossible. For Lingard backs out, not because he is overburdened with scruples in regard to the husband, or even from a jealous feeling for his threatened freedom, but just because there happens to run through his character a streak of wayward idealism. His parting words to Mrs. Travers enable us to put our finger on the precise spot: — »It was only after I heard they gave you the ring that I felt the hold you have got on me. How could I tell before? What has hate or love to do with you and me? Hate. Love. What can touch you? For me you stand above death itself; for I see now that as long as I live you will never die.»

A strange love-speech, and a stranger leave-taking! Yet how very typical — how extremely Conradesque an attitude! For whether we are convinced or not by his superb gesture of sacrifice, there can be no doubt that in thus waving aside the claims of his sensuous self, Lingard acts in conformity to the author's own deep-felt notions of heroism and honour. We need only remember

the parallel cases of Jim and Razumov to realize the intimate significance of Lingard's decision. Like those two, Lingard at a critical juncture of his life renounces the happiness of love in obedience to the imperative summons of that exalted ideal of conduct he has been unconsciously working out for himself, and because in his strong and profoundly truthful nature there is no room for compromise and falsehood. Each of the three is there to demonstrate, by his individual example, the truth once laid down in a memorable passage by their creator: — »That a sacrifice must be made, that something has to be given up, is the truth engraved in the innermost recesses of the fair temple built for our edification by the masters of fiction. There is no other secret behind the curtain. All adventure, all love, every success is resumed in the supreme energy of an act of renunciation. It is the uttermost limit of our power; it is the most potent and effective force at our disposal on which rest the labours of a solitary man in his study, the rock on which have been built commonwealths whose might casts a dwarfing shadow upon two oceans. Like a natural force which is obscured as much as illuminated by the multiplicity of phenomena, the power of renunciation is obscured by the mass of weaknesses, vacillations, secondary motives and false steps and compromises which make up the sum of our activity. But no man or woman worthy of the name can pretend to anything more, to anything greater. (»Notes on Life and Letters«).

Mrs. Travers is more simply human. What Lingard's departure meant to the woman whose rich, passionate nature had never found an outlet for her capacity of devotion and love, we gather from her words to d'Alcacer, while showing him the ring given her by Lingard — the most touching thing in the whole story: — »Look

at this, Mr. d'Alcacer. This is the thing which I asked you whether I should give up or conceal — the symbol of the last hour — the call of the supreme minute. And he said it would have made no difference! He is the most magnanimous of men and the uttermost farthing has been paid. He has done with me. The most magnanimous ... but there is a grave on the sands by which I left him with no glance to spare for me. His last glance on earth! I am left with this thing. Absolutely unimportant. A dead talisman.» With a nervous jerk she flung the ring overboard, then with hurried entreaty to d'Alcacer, 'Stay here a moment. Don't let anybody come near us,' she burst into tears and turned her back on him.»

»The Planter of Malata» (in »Within the Tides») again deals with the exceptional state of feelings of a woman of the world, forced to play a part in a series of events of unusual character, while the male centre-figure is another embodiment of the type of hero with which many of the author's works have made us familiar: the man addicted professionally to some sort of practical pursuit, but subject to the eccentricities and delusions of a romantic temperament. Like Lingard, Geoffrey Renouard is under the sway of an infatuation that is not of the senses only, but merges the idea of physical possession in an impassioned yearning for a brilliant mirage, an unattainable ideal: — »'What's that to me what you are?' he answered. 'At a sign from you I would climb up to the seventh heaven to bring you down to earth for my own — and if I saw you steeped to the lips in vice, in crime, in mud, I would go after you, take you to my arms — wear you for an incomparable jewel on my breast. And that's love — true love — the gift and the curse of the gods. There is no

other.'» But in this case the woman gets the better of the man through sheer lack of comprehension and feeling. Indignantly she refuses to listen, and goes away. But in the heart of her spurned lover her image lives on to work its spell, as if in revenge of her outraged delicacy. Shadowy, ghostlike, already no longer of this world — the world that has no use for a love like his — Geoffrey Renouard sets out, on a wild sunset evening, from the shores of his lonely island, still echoing with the words and footsteps of one so passionately desired, »to swim beyond the confines of life — with a steady stroke — his eyes fixed on a star.» »The Planter of Malata» is a depressing tale, its gloomy ending softened by no mellowing hues. Among all the women in Conrad, Felicia Moorsome is the least attractive as a character, the hardest, the most illiberal. She reminds one of that saying of one of the author's favourite writers, paraphrased by himself somewhere: »Nous mettons l'infini dans l'amour. Ce n'est pas la faute des femmes.»

It is possible, as has been suggested, that »Nostromo» will ultimately come to be regarded as Conrad's greatest achievement. In the meantime it appears to be, of all his longer works, the one least known and least popular. This relative lack of warmth in the general estimate is not, perhaps, absolutely surprising. It undoubtedly means an extra strain on the reader's attention to have the incidents of a story told him in an order which is not that of their actual occurrence, and in »Nostromo» the author displays a disregard of chronological sequence the effect of which is aggravated by the complicated and a little disjointed character of the plot. This, in its turn, seems to hang together with certain difficulties entailed by the composition of the story — difficulties the nature of which may be guessed from the author's

own notes: — »It took the best part of the years 1903—4 to do; with many intervals of renewed hesitation, lest I should lose myself in the ever-enlarging vistas opening before me as I progressed deeper in my knowledge of the country. Often, also, when I had thought myself to a standstill over the tangled-up affairs of the Republic, I would, figuratively speaking, pack my bag, rush away from Sulaco for a change of air and write a few pages of »The Mirror of the Sea».« (»Notes on my Books»). Another, and perhaps weightier, objection might be formulated thus: there is no really leading character in the book, no *hero,* in fact, in the sense of a personage kept continually to the foreground, and dominating his entourage either through the influence of his actions or by virtue of his intrinsic qualities. Gian' Battista, — »Nostromo,« — does neither. In a great number of the events he plays no part at all, or an invisible one. As one critic has finely observed: — »We believe in Nostromo, but we are told about him — we have not met him.« The reader of novels is not in favour of heroes acting too persistently behind the curtain. As a protagonist in the story, Nostromo is on a level with, rather than above, half a dozen others, one of whom at least — Don Carlos Gould, »the Idealist-creator of Material Interests« — might have been worked up into as great a character of romance and as effective a centre-figure.

In spite of these failings the story remains a supremely fascinating one. None of Conrad's other novels has the same spaciousness of design or variety of interest. And it is the one which includes the greatest number of striking and strongly imagined characters: Carlos Gould and his wife, Monygham, Decoud, Avellanos and his daughter, the three Violas, all and each are indelibly

graven on our memory. Finally it offers us, against the background of a great political revolution, the poignant spectacle of an individual tragedy, of a passion of the heart, summing up, as it were, in its violence, unlawfulness and secrecy, the spirit of an epoch, a race and a country.

Nostromo's end is invested with that character of intrinsic justice and fitness which appeals, independently of our feelings of sympathy or compassion, to deep permanent instincts of our nature. The incomparable Capataz de Cargadores, the respected and feared, the incorruptible and brilliant, betraying men's trust in his miraculous honesty and faithfulness by a piece of audacious roguery — and found out! Making love to the sister of the woman to whom he has plighted his faith — and killed providentially by her father! In such a destiny there is something to gratify those to whom the contemplation of human affairs is a moral end in itself. The victim of an enchanting and destructive illusion, he goes to join the shadows of those whom a wicked ambition or sinful desire lured, in an unguarded moment, from the path of loyalty and righteousness.

But the death of Nostromo is coupled in our memory with emotions and visions other than those suggested by the moral pertinence of the event. Of all the wonderful things in this story, none is more wonderful than the scene which brings on its crisis — the meeting, in the dusk of evening, of Gian' Battista and Giselle. Finding himself alone with the alluring young creature, whose »smooth forehead had the soft, pure sheen of a priceless pearl in the . . . sunset, mingling the gloom of starry spaces, the purple of the sea, and the crimson of th sky in a magnificent stillness,» Nostromo with a shock becomes alive to the danger that threatens him. But the

consciousness of his peril merely adds to the violence of his sensations. She complains of her loneliness, of her tedious life, »spreading unconsciously, like a flower its perfume in the coolness of the evening, the indefinable seduction of her person.» And as night wears on, and the shadows deepen around them, and the artless caress of her voice envelops him still more insidiously, Nostomo, the faithful, the trusted of all, unable longer to withstand the indolent and subtle charm that goes out from her like a fragrance into the silence, declares his passion and pours forth his adoration in words pleading and tender — he whom we had known, up to that moment, as but little articulate, and whose emotional life had been veiled from us, but who now discloses at last something of his true self, in the expansiveness of his guilty love. And the glamour of the man's prodigious and mysterious influence helps him to his last and most marvellous triumph. Masterful and gentle, he makes her his own. And the night is murmurous with their broken whispers, with their hopes, their promises, their dreams — their dazed, exultant dreams that were never to come true.

But Conrad is already out of his »first phase,» and there is a subtle significance in the fact that the story does not end on the voluptuous and sensuous note of this scene of clandestine love-making, and that the last word is not Giselle's but Linda's. For out of Linda's faithful and simple heart there ascends the purer and clearer voice of a deep human distress and a promise of undying remembrance: — »'It is I who loved you,' she whispered, with a face as set and white as marble in the moonlight. 'I! Only I! She will forget thee, killed miserably for her pretty face. I cannot understand. I cannot understand. But I shall never forget

thee. Never!' She stood silent and still, as if collecting her strength to throw all her fidelity, her pain, bewilderment and despair into one great cry. 'Never! Gian' Battista!' ... In that true cry of love and grief that seemed to ring aloud from Punta Mala to Azuera and away to the bright line of the horizon, overhung by a big white cloud shining like a mass of solid silver, the genius of the magnificent Capataz de Cargadores dominated the dark Gulf containing his conquests of treasure and love.»

A reader turning from »Nostromo» to »Chance» is more likely to be struck by the dissimilarities of the two stories than by their resemblance. Indeed the contrast is a striking one. The former is a stirring tale of adventure bringing before our eyes not merely a crowd of sharply individualized characters, but unrolling behind them, like a gigantic and gorgeous background, the sinister farce of a South American revolution. In »Chance,» where the scenes are mainly enacted in the more commonplace atmosphere of an English country-side or the cabin of an ocean-going merchant-vessel, the element of incident proper is even so slight (considering the bulky dimensions of the volume) that we may actually say the point of the story is the very fact that, up to the crucial moment, »nothing happens» at all; while the actors are no more in number than might conveniently find room within the bulkheads of Captain Anthony's cuddy. In »Nostromo» there is nobody between the author and ourselves, the events, that is, are suffered to speak for themselves. »Chance» is filled to the brim with the discursive and reminiscent wisdom of Marlow — the fiction of a »personator» making this mode of narrative natural. It is the most intellectual of al Conrad's books, the one where he gives us most of his speculative and a little cynical humour.

Captain Anthony, however, is as true a figure of romance as Nostromo — not indeed because of his gifts or achievements, but through that passionate twist of his nature which urges his own life, and that of another being, into such strange and awkward grooves. Among the cases of eccentricity or morbid feeling dealt with by Conrad, that of Anthony — the husband who, from a mistaken sense of delicacy and wounded pride, refrains from consummating his marriage with the woman he loves and desires — is one of the, psychologically, most interesting. Not only is the situation of the couple (it may be supposed) somewhat rare in itself, but its painful absurdity is rendered infinitely more poignant by the very facilities it offers them of enjoying their lawful love without restraint, and by the fact of their being both practically outside all conventions, hampered by no ties of dependence and by no regard for the feelings of others. Yet there they are, on board their own ship, a newly wedded couple debarred from a happiness which nobody grudges them, by a renunciation which would have been ludicrous but for its serious consequences to the parties themselves. And we follow the drama in its sequence of ever fresh misunderstandings, in an enervating atmosphere of suspicions, shyness, distrust and yearning, the wife too unimaginative to penetrate her husband's feelings or too proud to give the hint required, the husband brought to the verge of madness by the tantalizing effects of nearness without intimacy, and by the futility of a passion that wears down and saps his manhood — until, the tension of this glaringly false situation being at its highest, Nature at last asserts her rights and, aided by Chance, proceeds to bring about the tardy union of two well-mated lovers.

If there are cases that would seem to justify our

speaking of the »fatality» of a particular man meeting a particular woman, Captain Anthony's and Flora de Barral's is such a case; and all their tribulations arise from their slowness in realizing their common destiny and in obeying the call of their hearts. But the author supplies us himself with the best commentary on his tale: — »'... Pairing off is the fate of mankind. And if two beings thrown together, mutually attracted, resist the necessity, fail in understanding and voluntarily stop short of the — the embrace, in the noblest meaning of the word, then they are committing a sin against life, the call of which is simple. Perhaps sacred. And the punishment of it is an invasion of complexity, a tormenting, forcibly tortuous involution of feelings, the deepest form of suffering from which indeed something significant may come at last, which may be criminal or heroic, may be madness or wisdom — or even a straight if despairing decision.'»

Among Conrad's longer tales »The Secret Agent» appeals by the force of a consistent and studied brutalism. In its mingled effect of sordidness and crime it gives as depressing a view as may be supposed conformable to actual truth of the amount of individual misery conceivable within the pale of a civilized community under the benign protection of wise and impartial authorities. It has something of the cold and incisive harshness of Maupassant's stories about Norman peasantry (a yet nearer approach to which may be found in »The Idiots» in »Tales of Unrest»). There is a notable difference however. Unlike the masters of the French Realist school of fiction, under the influence of whose traditions and examples this novel was obviously composed, Conrad can hardly be called a pessimist in his general outlook; neither does the book, in spite of its grimness, imply a

cynical disbelief in the working efficiency of a society including among its members the prototypes of a Verloc or an Ossipon. »The Secret Agent,» in fact, stands for an attitude rather than a philosophy; and it is clearly an attitude that was in a way dictated (as in the case of »Under Western Eyes» and »The Informer») by the author's national and racial aversions. The aim of the story is to show up, on what is evidently well-documented information or, at least, a remarkably shrewd insight, some of the characters and doings of that underground world of, mostly foreign, anarchists and agents provocateurs which infested certain great European cities during the closing years of the Czar regime, and the existence of which in a place like London was peculiarly facilitated by a lenient immigrant legislation. It lays bare the idiosyncrasies and inner workings of this obnoxious tribe of maniacs, dreamers, agitators and parasites — the insane ferocity of one, the canting sentimentalism of another, the unblushing rascality of a third, the criminal inanity of all these pretended attempts at furthering the cause of Freedom or Justice by individuals who were merely nourishing their private grievances or hugging their projects of social revenge in an atmosphere of treachery, loafing and vice. Certain aspects, less often exposed to the public eye, of the relations between the revolutionary camp and the police or the representatives of foreign Powers are also dealt with. Thus at the top-end of the social scale of whose nethermost extremity the miserable, starving megalomaniac nicknamed the Professor holds a precarious tenure, we find a Home Secretary, an Assistant Commissioner of Police and a prominent member of an Embassy.

It is obvious that the artistic treatment of such a subject would entail certain difficulties owing to the

writer's strongly accented attitude. Many of the personages (as he has himself pointed out) laid themselves fairly open to caricature. A lesser artist might have been tempted to vent his scorn in recriminations and in satire. Not so Conrad. The intenseness of his disgust and indignation, on the other hand, almost precluded the adoption of a severely »impassive» style of narrative. An *ironic* method ultimately suggested itself as the only possible one in the case. The amazing skill evinced in the application of this method is one of Conrad's artistic master-feats. It never once interferes with the author's scrupulous fidelity to the conditions under which the incidents are supposed to occur, but we are conscious of it all along, as for instance in the constant repetition of derisive epithets; in the peculiar use of phrases like the following ones, which take on an aspect of sinister humour from their context: — »His husky domestic voice . . .,» »the reticent decencies of this home life,» »He was tired, resigned in a truly marital spirit;» and, generally, as a subtle intimation of the writer's emotional reaction upon his subject: — »Mr. Verloc, in a soft and conjugal tone, was now expressing his firm belief that there were yet a good few years of quiet life before them both. He did not go into the question of means. A quiet life it must be and, as it were, nesting in the shade, concealed among men whose flesh is grass; modest, like the life of violets. The words used by Mr. Verloc were: 'Lie low for a bit.'» [1])

[1]) It is interesting to note the effect of this pervading mood of irony on Conrad's prose. »The Secret Agent» is a comparatively »simple tale» (as its sub-title runs) not merely in regard to its plot structure and number of actors, but also in the character of its phrasing. Passages like the following will be more frequently met with than in any other story of Conrad's: — »Mr. Verloc was not

This method of ironic presentation, for which the professional conceit of Chief Inspector Heat, Mr. Vladimir's social charms and the domestic respectability of Mr. Verloc were equally fair game, gives a singular poignancy to the purely pathetic incidents. The old mother's »last cab-drive» is told with an exquisite and tender humour that leaves us in no uncertainty about the author's feelings for the sufferers and victims — including Winnie Verloc herself. Winnie Verloc is not a character naturally given to extravagant behaviour or marked out for any sort of distinction. In the ordinary course of things she would have been the capable but perfectly insignificant wife of some small shopkeeper or publican. She lacks refinement and amiability; she is a woman of few ideas and fewer words; confirmed by experience in her belief that »things do not stand being looked into,» she refrains from idle speculation about them and seeks shelter behind an attitude of stolid indifference and cold reserve. But in the depths of that frost-bitten and gloomily resigned nature there smoulders the fire of a violent and jealous passion. Connected with all that her life holds of proud or bitter memories, her sisterly devotion has developed morbidly into a fierce maternal ardour of protection. For Stevie she

frightful to behold. He looked comfortable. Moreover he was dead. Mrs. Verloc entertained no vain delusions on the subject of the dead. Nothing brings them back, neither love nor hate. They can do nothing to you. They are as nothing. Her mental state was tinged by a sort of austere contempt for that man who had let himself be killed so easily. He had been the master of a house, the husband of a woman, and the murderer of her Stevie. And now he was of no account in every respect. He was of less practical account than the clothing of his body, than his overcoat, than his boots — than that hat lying on the floor. He was nothing. He was not worth looking at. He was even no longer the murderer of poor Stevie.»

has spurned the offer of true love; for his sake she has accepted the humiliation of marriage with a man who means nothing to her, and wilfully stinted herself of the joys and consolations of motherhood. She loves him with a feeling that relieves the insipid taste of her life and which she obscurely excepts from »the rule of decay affecting all things human and some things divine.«

And now her moral nature is subjected to a shock »of which, in the physical order, the most violent earthquake of history could only be a faint and languid rendering.« She is robbed of the treasure of her love by the very man with whom she has struck a shameful bargain for the single purpose of ensuring its greater safety! From this moment onwards Winnie can no longer control her will and her senses; with the insane deliberation of madness she directs all the efforts of her mind towards the sole aim of revenging herself upon him who has done her this deadly wrong and, having cheated her out of seven years of her life, now wants »to keep her for nothing.« In the awful last scene between Winnie and her husband, imprinted on our vision in every ghastly detail with an almost ferocious power of insistence, the story reaches its emotional climax. Considered in its outward aspect the murder of Verloc is an act of unnatural and vulgar atrocity; traced back to its motives it allows of a truer and more charitable view. In that view, Winnie Verloc's desperate gesture confers upon a life destitute of happiness, of the simplest grace, and almost of decency, the redeeming nobility of a supreme devotion, of a love invincible and undying in the cataclysm of blighted hopes and destroyed illusions. Technically, she may be (in the phrase of her false lover, »a degenerate with a murdering mania.« But in her uncompromising fidelity to her lost ideals and relentless

adherence to the duty of retaliation there is something humanly satisfying and even admirable that braves the shallow nomenclature of a pretended science of man's misery and despair. Crime has a hierarchy of its own, independent of its judicial bearings; it falls under aesthetic and ethical, no less than legal, categories. The intrinsic character of Winnie's action is disclosed by the simple fact that our feelings for the murderess are not those of loathing or contempt, but of sympathy and compassion. Hers is what a Frenchman would call »un beau crime.«

The curious aspects of Russian life dealt with in »Under Western Eyes» bespeak an amount of insight and an intimacy of knowledge such as are not to be expected from mere outsiders. It is true that Conrad has formally disclaimed any peculiar qualifications to judge of Russian affairs. The course of action in the novel just-mentioned is, he assures us, »the result not af a special experience but of general knowledge, fortified by earnest meditation.» It must be said, however, that this assertion is hardly borne out either by the story itself or by the fact of the author's descent from a family of Russian Poles, in whose traditions and history we know him to have been devoutly interested. »Under Western Eyes» is undoubtedly the work of one initiated, to whom the subject must have been in various ways a congenial one. To a writer like Conrad, endowed with so marked a gift for searching analysis and so deep an interest in cases of moral aberration and the perplexities of passion, the study of that eminently Russian phenomenon, the *agent provocateur*, was bound to appeal with a sort of familiar suggestiveness. As a matter of fact, the story may be defined as the most Russian novel written in a non-Russian language; not from its obvious indebtedness to Dostoievsky or other models, nor because the cha-

racters are mostly Russians, but because, for all its detachment, it sees things as it were from within, with an intuitive clearness of vision. We are not surprised, then, at being told that the book, which appears to have met with scant favour on its first appearance in England, has found »universal recognition« in Russia, having been republished there in many editions.

It is easier, however, to feel than to give concrete instances of this peculiar raciness and flavour of the soil of those parts of the story that relate immediately to things Russian. It may be just a few lines, conjuring up a vision of the distant country — one of those suggestive little touches that help to create an atmosphere of actuality round a story. Or it may be some shrewd remarks on the people itself, its genius, its mission, its history: — »In its pride of numbers, in its strange pretensions of sanctity, and in the secret readiness to abase itself in suffering, the spirit of Russia is the spirit of cynicism. It informs the declarations of her statesmen, the theories of her revolutionists, and the mystic vaticinations of prophets to the point of making freedom look like a form of debauch, and the Christian virtues themselves appear actually indecent.« Indeed, with such unerring sureness of insight had Conrad grasped the true character and drift of the revolutionary movement that it enabled him, ten years before the fact, to foretell its upshot and to give an exact summary of the events now unrolling themselves before our eyes in Bolschevik Russia: — »A violent revolution falls into the hands of narrow-minded fanatics and of tyrannical hypocrites at first. Afterwards comes the turn of all the pretentious intellectual failures of the time. Such are the chiefs and the leaders. You will notice that I have left out the mere rogues. The scrupulous and the just, the noble,

humane, and devoted natures; the unselfish and the intelligent may begin a movement -- but it passes away from them. They are not the leaders of a revolution. They are its victims: the victims of disgust, of disenchantment — often of remorse. Hopes grotesquely betrayed, ideals caricatured — that is the definition of revolutionary success.»

But ten years ago the Russian revolution, now triumphant and already past its zenith, was little more — to the world — than a Utopian scheme in the overheated brains of a handful of fanatics, weaving their plots obscurely and carrying on a seemingly hopeless war against the stupid oppression of a powerful autocracy. It is in that fiercely militant, underground phase of the great movement that our author locates his story of the crime and penitence of Kirylo Sidorovitch Razumov, presenting it in the light of a real episode of some notoriety at the time.

The merits of that story have been somewhat variously appraised by Conrad's critics. While one of them speaks admiringly of the precision and subtlety of its language and the sureness of its art, another declares it to be »the least vital of his books,» — a dictum the truth of which appears somewhat less convincing when we find yet a third commend it for its »vitality.» There may be some grounds for each of these opinions. It is equally obvious that »Under Western Eyes» is a product of ripened genius and proved literary skill, and that it is not comparable for breadth of vision or wealth of inspiration with a work like »Nostromo.» Its dominant note is one of scorn rather than of pity or sympathy. The hero's appeal to our feelings »lacks sentiment.» Despite his virtues we never »warm up» to Razumov. Try as we may to find some excuse for his betrayal in

cold blood of Haldin, in the circumstances of his descent and in the tremendous risk of a judicial implication in Haldin's crime, still we cannot go the length of really sympathizing with the man. Perhaps it is simply that he is a little beyond the range of our emotional faculties. In all these revolutionary transactions there is something remotely and weirdly foreign, outside our experience, repulsive to our sedater habits and more settled modes of feeling. We find ourselves among creatures who nourish their hatreds with the memories of secular suffering, oppression and despair; whose devotion to their ideals is great and unselfish indeed, but not greater than the ferocity and fanaticism with which they fight for them, refraining from no extremity of violence, deceit or lawlessness. And mingled with these, in a desperate and obscure imbroglio of plotting and counterplotting, the myrmidons of autocracy — informers, renegades, paid cut-throats, past masters in double-dealing or votaries of the torture-chamber, men like Councillor Mikulin, General T— —, Nikita, that »perfect flower of the terroristic wilderness,» and the rest. Dreamers, agitators, upholders or agents of the old regime — they are all and each under the curse of their common parentage, they are all alike and akin in their recklessness of life, their cynical contempt for individual suffering and their proneness to extreme decisions and violent measures.

An English reader, therefore, having in mind nothing but the strangeness of its moral atmosphere and the painful character of its plot, may well be inclined, like Mr. Hugh Walpole, to find this a story »whose heart is cold.» Still there is a redeeming feature: the beautiful and warmly human character of Natalia Haldin. Razumov, it will be remembered, to avenge himself on those who had robbed him of his »hard-working, purposeful ex-

istence,» and to further, according to his lights and powers, those ideas of lawfulness, order and spiritual rest which seemed to him the only warrant of his country's safety, enters upon a course of action which he well knows involves his own moral impoverishment, debarring him, as it does, from all the gentler influences of life and refusing him an outlet for the natural and innocent cravings of his heart. But his meeting with the sister of the man so monstrously betrayed by him becomes the means of his salvation. The influence of that generous and trusting creature not only softens his embittered mind, but shows him the way to clarity about himself and to atonement for his crime. For with all his arrogance and cynicism and although blinded by hate and anger, Razumov is neither obdurate nor naturally low-minded. He cannot silence the small, but insistent voice of his conscience, and his love for Natalia at last opens his eyes to the enormity of his act. All this part of the story, setting forth Razumov's struggle with himself and subsequent confession, is of course reminiscent in its main features of the end of »Crime and Punishment.» In both novels a romantic love-passion is represented as actuating the hero's self-disclosure. What gives additional poignancy to Razumov's giving himself up to the Nihilist's tribunal, however, is the fact that it meant the loss for ever of the happiness already within reach of his hands. Moreover the confession was not in any way forced from him as he was not really suspected and, Ziemianitch once dead, there was no chance of the truth ever becoming known. Thus Razumov's moral victory is the greater of the two. If Conrad's story ends on a more tragic note, our parting vision of his hero maimed and crippled — a hopeless wreck of the once handsome and promising young student — will

at least be associated with the memory of a supreme gesture of courage and self-sacrifice.

Of Conrad's longer stories »The Arrow of Gold« is his nearest approach to failure. As far as the writing goes, it is beyond praise. The conversational fluency and cultured ease of its style, its astounding variety of shades and accents, all this is pleasant enough and worthy of admiration. It has the experience, the cleverness, the wit, the fine humour of »Chance,« but without Marlow, that is, without sententiousness. Yet as a narrative it is disappointing. Is it that something makes us doubt, all along, the consistency of the author's outlook in regard to his own tale? Or that he has had too much in mind his saying that »it is the subtleties of personalities, and contacts, and events, that count for interest and memory — and pretty well nothing else?» Or the baffling vagueness of the heroine — that Rita of whom her lover conceived the absurd suspicion that she was »suspended in the air»? For Rita is as distant as she is delightful, and we are beset in regard to her by the same sense of unreality as made things seem shrouded and shadowy to her own dreamy gaze. It is not until we have got more than half-way that we begin to see through the nature of the lady's relations to her own world of libertinism and intrigue. Up to then we are left to imagine as best we can from mere hints and sous-entendus the drift of certain episodes in her previous career having an indirect bearing on the events.

The manner in which some of the latter are brought to the reader's cognizance is equally allusive and oblique — so much so as to make them appear altogether unimportant and without essential connexion with the remainder of the story, which is indeed one of subtleties of moods and passions, rather than of incident. Thus

much of what makes up the action properly speaking will be referred to briefly and, as it were, in passing: »we had an extremely successful trip,» or summed up in a few sentences: »... one evening, I found myself weary, heartsore, my brain still dazed and with awe in my heart entering Marseilles by way of the railway station, after many adventures, one more disagreeable than another, involving privations, great exertions, a lot of difficulties with all sorts of people,» etc. The movements of Captain Blunt, in pursuance of his scheme of matrimonial strategy, are kept as much in the background as the comings and goings of »Monsieur George.» On the whole, the actors themselves, — always excepting Rita, — as they actually appear before us, with all the minute accidents of face and gesture, are curiously at variance with the shadowy and elusive characters of their attitudes and speech.

Yet the story is a significant one. We may be baffled in our attempts to fit together the puzzle of the heroine's career and personality, but as an embodiment of a peculiar phase of her author's philosphy of love she is most illuminating. Her very remoteness, while detracting from her interest as a living and acting figure in a drama, is eloquent at least of the mood in which she was conceived. No other novelist of the day has created a finer series of women characters than Conrad — more lifelike, more seductive, more subtly feminine. But the peculiar tone of feeling with which these characters are presented varies as much from story to story as the characters themselves. He may write about them unemotionally, a little cynically, like a Frenchman, descanting on their weaknesses and follies with the good-humoured irony and amused insight of a man of experience. Or he may depict the passionate daughters of the jungle, and com-

pass them around with an atmosphere of mysterious romance and voluptuous allurement. Or he will impersonate his belief in their generosity, kindliness, loyalty and good sense, in women like Emilia Gould, Natalia Haldin or Mrs. Travers, lovable embodiments of »that something not wholly of this world which women's more exalted nature infuses into their passions, into their sorrows, into their joys; as if their adventurous souls had the power to range beyond the orbit of the earth for the gathering of their love, their hate — and their charity.» But Rita is as different from all these as the story in which she figures so strangely is unique among Conrad's works.

There is no need for us to speculate on the identity of Monsieur George, the author having made no secret of the intimately personal character of his tale: it is »the product of his private garden,» this story of a young man's »initiation (through an ordeal which required some resolution to face) into the life of passion,» — or of *one* passion rather, for of the »two mistresses of life's values» — the sea and woman — who revealed themselves at one and the same time to our youthful worshipper, it is with the latter only that we are concerned here, — with »the unfathomable seduction» of woman casting the immemorial spell of her sex upon a heart duly prepared for the event. In this fact lies the justification of the author's conception of his heroine: if she strikes us as a little unreal, it is because she is meant to do so. For is she not the unattainable and mysterious *Ideal,* in whose form »there seemed to beat the pulse of divinity rather than blood»? No doubt; but this, too, explains why the whole story is something of a dangerous experiment. For while the heroine of a novel may lend herself to any amount of divinization on the

part of her lover and yet, by virtue of the author's art, remain real and lifelike to the reader, the effect is quite the opposite when the lover and the author happen to be one and the same person.

This being so, it is in the expression of Monsieur George's feelings, and in these feelings themselves, rather than in their object, that we are interested here. And Monsieur George commands a style of amorous eulogy that earns him a place apart among other panegyrists of »l'éternel féminin.» Perhaps it is not to be wondered at that the lover of Rita should have found »nothing more life-giving, inspiring, and illuminating than the emanation of her charm.» Other youths in a state of infatuation have testified to a similar experience. Or why quarrel with him for ascribing to the irresistible power which ruled over his heart and his mind »the brilliance of sunshine together with the unfathomable splendour of the night»? The sentiment is natural if pretentious. Only when he assures us that her face, »by an indefinable quality of charm beyond all analysis,» made him dream of »remote races, of strange generations, of the faces of women sculptured on immemorial monuments and of those lying unsung in their tombs,» or we are told that the lady is »as old as the world,» or that she has in her »something of the women of all time,» we wonder a little through what chance the miracle of Dona Rita has come to be expounded and glorified in a spirit and a style so curiously reminiscent of those in which the scholar of Brasenose once interpreted to his own fastidious and dreamy self the alluring smile and undying fascination of La Gioconda.

It is in the descriptions of the actual love-scenes, however, with their mixture of gallantry and passion that the peculiar tone and artistic purpose of the story may

be best gathered: — »I had the time to lay my infinite adoration at her feet whose white insteps gleamed below the dark edge of the fur out of quilted blue silk bedroom slippers, embroidered with small pearls. I had never seen them before; I mean the slippers. The gleam of the insteps, too, for that matter. I lost myself in a feeling of deep content, something like a foretaste of a time of felicity which must be quiet or it couldn't be eternal. I had never tasted such perfect quietness before. It was not of this earth. I had gone far beyond. It was as if I had reached the ultimate wisdom beyond all dreams and all passions. She was That which is to be contemplated to all Infinity.» For a lover endowed with so remarkable a faculty of sublimating into mystic visions each successive aspect of an adored being, of sensing her presence in him »only as a great, glowing, indeterminate tenderness, something like the evening light disclosing after the white passion of the day infinite depths in the colour of the sky and an unsuspected soul of peace in the protean forms of life,» — for him there remains but one other step in the progress of his passionate refinings, that of doubting her actual existence. And so there is nothing really extraordinary about a passage like the following save that it sounds astonishingly stilted and affected: — »You have always eluded me except in one or two moments which seem still more dream-like than the rest. Since I came into this room you have done nothing to destroy my conviction of your unreality apart from my self. You haven't offered me your hand to touch. Is it because you suspect that apart from me you are but a mere phantom, and that you fear to put it to the test?»

»The Arrow of Gold,» like »An Outcast of the Islands,» indicates a climax in Conrad's career as a writer.

The one embodies the romance of a fierce sensual passion, the other, the romance of a first love, of the initiation of youth into the greatest of life's mysteries. Between these two stories there lie the meditations, the work, of half a lifetime. Nothing shows better the trend of those meditations and the gradual change in the fundamental mood underlying that work, than the contrast between the bold grip on life, the fresh sensualism and voluptuous intenseness of the one, and the extreme elusiveness and the sophisticated reveries of the other.

Even in a brief study of Conrad as one of the great masters of contemporary fiction, dealing with his works in the one way they should be dealt with, — as creations of imaginative art, — there must be some room left for a discussion of the writer's presumable attitude, other than purely aesthetic, to his own characters and the events they are represented as engaged in. In other words, the critic will feel called upon at least to shadow forth some sort of reply to the question as to how far those works, which convey so rich and varied a picture of human affairs and human passions, are pervaded by some deep moral conviction, some dominant philosophy of man and the universe. And here, fortunately, we have the best authority available to guide our surmises — the author himself. For we have not only such evidence to go by as may be deduced from the actual stories. In his pages of reminiscence and self-commentary Conrad speaks to us with a perfect frankness, not merely about the facts and experiences of his writing life, but of all sorts of things besides on which a man cannot very well pronounce a sincere opinion without committing to his readers or hearers something of his true self.

One particular misconception should be done away

with at once — the idea of Conrad as a sort of showman pulling the wires of his tragic puppets with a grin of sardonic enjoyment or in a mood of morose indifference. That Conrad does not »feel with his people» is an often heard criticism. For all that it is an altogether unwarrantable one. It is the old story of identifying the mood or attitude embodied in a work of art with the artist's own civic feelings or moral convictions. Conrad has himself been well aware that this is a point where the imaginative writer will readily lay himself open to misunderstandings. For in answering a charge of insensibility brought against him by some press reviewer or other, he takes the opportunity to set matters right, and to justify the reserve of his attitude in regard to his own characters on the ground both of the exigencies of art and of the personal dignity of the artist: — »In order to move others deeply we must deliberately allow ourselves to be carried away beyond the bounds of our normal sensibility — innocently enough perhaps and of necessity, like an actor who raises his voice on the stage above the pitch of natural conversation — but still we have to do that. And surely this is no great sin. But the danger lies in the writer becoming the victim of his own exaggeration, losing the exact notion of sincerity, and in the end coming to despise truth itself as something too cold, too blunt for his purpose . . .» (»A Personal Record»).

One does not see where in all this that *sécheresse de cœur* comes in of which our author seems to be suspected in some quarters, nor why an unblinking acceptance of the hard and bitter facts of existence should be construed into a lack of sympathy and compassion. It is an allegation, moreover, expressly contradicted by his own formal statements as to what demands, other than art-

istic, should be made upon the novelist. »It must not be supposed,» he says, »that I claim for the artist in fiction the freedom of moral Nihilism. I would require from him many acts of faith of which the first would be the cherishing of an undying hope; and hope, it will not be contested, implies all the piety of effort and renunciation .... It seems as if the discovery made by many men at various times that there is much evil in the world were a source of proud and unholy joy unto some of the modern writers. That frame of mind is not the proper one in which to approach seriously the art of fiction.» And he adds, significantly: — »Of him from whose armoury of phrases one in a hundred thousand may perhaps hit the far-distant and elusive mark of art I would ask that in his dealings with mankind he should be capable of giving a tender recognition to their obscure virtues .... I would wish him to look with a large forgiveness at men's ideas and prejudices, which are by no means the outcome of malevolence, but depend on their education, their social status, even their professions ....» (»Notes on Life and Letters»).

It is true that the spirit of these and similar declarations would appear at first sight to be belied by not infrequent touches of sneering humour and bitter sarcasm — one thinks of the end of »An Outpost of Progress,» showing Kayerts hanging from she cross on the grave of his predecessor, »with one purple cheek playfully posed on the shoulder» and irreverently »putting out a swollen tongue at his Managing Director,» or of the dryly ironic account of the awful death of Señor Hirsch, »enterprising business man from Esmeralda,» (»Nostromo») — or by the accumulation of atrocious or shocking details aggravating the horror of certain endings, as in the case of »The Secret Agent,» or »Victory» or

»Because of the Dollars.» The explanation is simple enough, however. If Conrad's stories contain elements of a revolting character, that is neither because he takes a delight in the exhibition of depravity or guilt, nor from a cynical desire to commit an outrage on the reader's feelings, but because those things serve a definite purpose in an artistic scheme — because they form part of the *truth* as realized under the influence of certain emotional sympathies or aversions. And so again with his irony. That, too, may be simply a question of method, a mode of artistic treatment of a subject that would not have allowed of presentation in any other mood or keynote. Writing of »The Secret Agent» — one of the stories found fault with on the ground of their uncanny subject or squalid setting — he states his conviction that an ironic treatment was the only one that would enable him to say all he felt he would have to say »in scorn as well as in pity.» So far from testifying to a lack of responsiveness, Conrad's attitude to his own artistic inventions shows him, on the contrary, to be strongly dominated by his natural sensibilities.

Not as a cold-hearted misanthrope unsusceptible to tenderness and sympathy, but as a man of a resigned and somewhat sceptic outlook — that is how Conrad appears to the unprejudiced student of his work. And if we do not call him a »pessimist,» it is not because there would be no justification for so describing him. For it cannot be denied that his writings leave an impression of sadness, if not of bitterness. Most of them, we have seen, are tales of disasters, sufferings or crimes. His heroes either kill themselves or get killed, or come to grief in some irreparable way; or if successful, they have to buy their success at the price of superhuman efforts, of renunciations and sacrifices so absurdly out of pro-

portion to their object in view as to inspire one with the cynical reflection whether a great moral victory can be the most desirable achievement for a man to strive after on this imperfect earth. Enslaved to the iron laws of an inscrutable Destiny, or the mere playthings of Chance, the infinitesimal actors in some gigantic and puzzling spectacle of universal mockery, they are all sure, at some moment or other, to find life a terribly grave and complicated affair. Almayer, despised and cheated, finally abandoned, ends his days in a state of drunken torpor and abject wretchedness; his experience of life is summed up in the formula: »The world's a swindle!» Willems, no more fortunate, is shot dead by his mistress, after agonies of suffering. Razumov is subjected to an awful punishment that leaves him a cripple for the rest of his days. Mme Bacadou, the tragic mother of idiots, drowns herself after murdering her husband in an access of mad despair. Verloc (»The Secret Agent»), having brought about the death of his brother-in-law, a child, is stabbed by his wife. The murderess, on discovering that a false friend has robbed her of the money that would have secured her safety by flight, jumps into the sea, leaving her old mother to die in poverty and loneliness. Bessie Carvil (»To Morrow»), in the swift passion-laden moments of a nocturnal chance meeting, empties to its last dregs the cup of life's bitterness. Yanko (»Amy Foster») dies miserably, a poor human wreckage alone among foreigners, shunned and deserted by his own wife. »Victory» ends with a jumble of weird atrocities. In »The Rescue,» apart from the poignant sadness of the ending, there is the tragedy of Hassim and Immada, innocent victims of a stupid accident. Thus in all the stories, this element of suffering and pathos, so curiously significant, is always prominent. Determined, not by a

mere desire to secure an artistic and dramatic effect, but by the writer's temperament and constitutional outlook, it pervades his entire work with a note of disillusion and melancholy.

The same note of disenchantment will be found persistently struck in those remarks and aphorisms with which some of his stories are so lavishly interspersed. Comparisons may be invidious; yet one cannot help noticing the remarkable affinity of intellect that betrays itself, on so many points, between Conrad and »the most eloquent and just of French prose writers,» whom he so frequently paraphrases or alludes to. Anatole France, like Conrad, is a »great analyst of illusions,» and with his attitude of disabused curiosity and ironic tolerance Conrad — the foreigner — alone offers a parallel among English men of letters. The influence is obvious; but it does not detract from the symptomatic value of Conrad's sayings. One does not suspect a man like Conrad of posing; one simply cannot help being struck by certain resemblances, that is all. Conrad, too, affects a philosophic contempt and a pity tempered with irony. Like France, he inclines to consider his fellow-creatures in the bulk as »invariably stupid,» to deride their pretensions to greatness or courage: — »... the incapacity to achieve anything distinctly good or evil is inherent in our earthly condition. Mediocrity is our mark.» »... fear is natural to man, and even salutary. It has done as much as courage for the preservation of races and institutions.» Neither takes a flattering view of the intellectual abilities of humanity at large: — »... l'intelligence usurpe bien moins qu'on ne croit sur les instincts et les sentiments naturels, même chez les hommes don. l'intelligence a le plus de force ....» »Whether mature or not mature» (Conrad will assent), people »are for

the most part quite incapable of understanding what is happening to them.» Luckily, this state of things, however unsatisfactory in itself, seems to be all for the best: — »L'ignorance est la condition nécessaire, je ne dis pas du bonheur, mais de l'existence même.» Or as Conrad has it: — »It is better for mankind to be impressionable than reflective. Nothing humanely great — great, I mean, as affecting a whole mass of lives — has come from reflection.» Yet even so, for the immense majority of human beings their earthly existence is attended to the end by cares and worries and embittered by sorrow and disappointment. »The history of men on this earth since the beginning of ages may be resumed in one phrase of infinite poignancy: They were born, they suffered, they died.» (Which, as the reader of »Les Opinions de M. Jérôme Coignard» may remember, were the exact words used by the old academician in the ingenious apologue of Zémire — the King of Persia who was so very anxious to know »the history of mankind» before he died).

All this granted, however, and due allowance being made for the way in which the author's irony or pessimism determines his choice of subjects or, more subtly, his methods of creating an atmosphere and presenting his characters, it would be doing Conrad a very signal injustice to suppose that the lesson he wants us to gather from his work is one of apathy, or hopelessness, or despair. For let us reflect. Let us ask ourselves whether for all their grimness or sadness his books do not contain a bracing element, some moral instruction by which we may profit, something tending to fortify in us our hope, our belief, our resolution or our courage....

Take Almayer again. Is there no answer after all to his indignant question why he should suffer, and what

he had done to be treated so shamefully by »their swindle of a Providence»? There is: his fate overtakes him as the logical conclusion of a life of weakness, slovenliness and folly. If he earns our pity at all, it is by his cruelly wounded feelings as a father, by his share in that »capacity for suffering which makes man august in the eyes of men.» Or there is Willems, still inferior as a character, and with even slighter claims to our compassion: his falseness, his self-indulgence, his cowardly egoism, marked him out for merciless retaliation and a wretched end. Jim — a more subtly compounded nature — gets punished by a tormenting sense of disgrace, and at last by a tragic death, for minimizing his guilt and trying to elude the promptings of his conscience. As for Nostromo, we cannot but admire the exquisite irony of retribution that deprives him at one blow, in the very act of a renewed breach of faith, of his treasure, his good name, his stolen love and his life. Neither do we question the intrinsic justice of the fate that befell Razumow; his was the supreme sin, as his own words bore witness: »In giving Victor Haldin up, it was myself, after all, whom I have betrayed most basely.»

Now, in all this, what is the pervading idea — not thrust upon us with anything like the obviousness of a didactic purpose (or Conrad would not have been the artist he is), but present nevertheless, disengaging itself from the events themselves, as sure as it is true that »every subject in the region of intellect and emotion must have a morality of its own if it is treated at all sincerely»? Evidently the one of *responsibility;* the conviction, founded on experience and in the intimate sense of an intrinsic justice or fitness of things, that most men will have to pay on this earth for their sins, their weaknesses, their follies. But then, how about the trials

and sufferings inflicted on creatures altogether harmless and innocent, and so unmeaning in their apparent gratuitousness as to seem to us the very derision of Justice, and to preclude every attempt at an ethical explanation of terrestrial affairs? Ah, but those, too, are things as ancient as the world — the humiliation of the just, the martyrdom of the defenceless and friendless, the distressing spectacle of chivalry and delicacy despised by the canaille and laughed to scorn by the unscrupulous exploiters of their fellow-beings! As for an ethical view of the universe, based on the notion of divine retribution and justice, that is a different matter! Such a view, our author will shrewdly tell us, »involves us at last in so many cruel and absurd contradictions, where the last vestiges of faith, hope, charity, and even of reason itself, seem ready to perish,» that he has come to suspect »that the aim of creation cannot be ethical at all.» Yet even among the débris of its abandoned dogmas and crumbling faiths mankind has preserved a living sense of the fundamental distinction between good and evil, and is as alive as ever to the vital necessity of maintaining that distinction and enforcing the demands or precepts founded upon it. Whatever may be its attitude to a conjectural Beyond, humanity, singly and in the bulk, must needs conceive of itself as *moral*, and now as ever will require for mere »working purposes» some scheme or other of practical ethics. And such is the innate force of the few elementary ideas on which every such scheme is bound to rest that he who violates them, even though able to justify himself to the laws instituted for their safeguard, can not always do so before the secret tribunal of his own conscience. Man, in other terms, is born with a feeling of responsibility for his thoughts and desires and actions, and the finer his spiritual

organization, the keener and more easily stirred is that feeling, which — when all has been said — is about the one thing on this earth we have got to trust to for our guidance and to ensure the dignity and safety of our lives. By pointing implicitly this great and simple truth, Conrad's writings, independently of their qualities as works of art, may certainly be said to convey a moral lesson and to be inspired with a truly humane purpose.

This is also the case, in a more obvious and positive sense, with such of the stories as present us with examples of magnanimity, courage and fortitude, embodied in the acts or emotions of simple-hearted and straightforward natures, and arising from nothing more »romantic« than a plain, honest sense of duty. There is Captain MacWhirr, in »Typhoon,« a man obtuse of mind, endowed with no brilliant professional talents, looked down upon by those under him in command; by sheer force of character, and by adhering stoutly in the face of almost certain death to his simple notions of loyalty and duty he reveals himself their superior and almost the only man on board fit to grapple with the double difficulty of the hurricane and the coolies' riot. It is while describing the effect of Captain MacWhirr's words of command as, torn into incomprehensible shreds of sounds, they reach the ear of his first mate, that Conrad is granted the inspiration of some of the finest and most significant lines he has ever written, — that he utters his conviction that the voice of man, that »frail and indomitable sound that can be made to carry an infinity of thought, resolution and purpose . . . shall be pronouncing confident words on the last day, when heavens fall, and justice is done.«

Or one recalls the pathetic dissimulation, the sublime unselfishness, of that other sailor, Captain Whalley in »The End of the Tether«; the capacity of pity, helpfulness

and charity of strong-minded women like Natalia Haldin or Emilia Gould, of eminently humane men like Carlos Gould, — to mention a few only of those characters whom we feel to be, not always indeed the most stirring to our imaginative delight in subtle moods or striking attitudes, but most undoubtedly those nearest and dearest to their creator's heart. Whatever their marks of individual distinction, they all stand for those qualities that make for a »perfect competency in the business of living.» They are all there, in our memory, alive and faithful, ready to strengthen or revive by their example our belief in the intrinsic value and mysterious persuasiveness of all good actions and all kindly thoughts.

The subject of Conrad's methods of literary expression cannot be gone into with any fullness of detail in these pages, interesting as it would have been to study, in its distinguishing phases and formative influences, a style which, like most good things, has the faults of its qualities, but taken as a whole is without doubt the most accomplished and full-toned instrument of utterance that any living English writer has worked out for his individual purpose. All that can be done here is to point out some of its salient features, and to deduce from a material thus circumscribed a few considerations of general bearing.

A good deal of adverse comment has been made about Conrad's English. The criticism implied in such often-heard assertions as that »he doesn't write English,» is not without some foundation in fact. It is obvious that an author like Conrad, who cannot have entirely forgotten his native tongue, is bound to show *some* traces of his foreign parentage and of foreign influence in his treatment of a language not his own. A careful perusal of his early stories and novels will give some idea of

the linguistic difficulties with which their author has had to contend before attaining to his present mastery and ease of expression. The extreme beauty of that prose cannot veil its technical imperfections; it is a style still in the making, abounding in faulty constructions, in strange idioms and mannerisms. Some of these betray an influence from the French, as, for instance, an exaggerated partiality for the post-position of the adjectives, a device that gives a curiously un-English ring to many of Conrad's phrases: — »Through the halfopen shutter a ray of sunlight, a ray merciless and crude, came into the room, ... lingered on the corner of the dusky bookshelf, in a red glow intense and mocking .... And the night entered the room. The night abrupt, impenetrable and all-filling with its flood of darkness; the night cool and merciful; ... she turned over, sleepless, in the confused conviction of her wickedness, thinking of that man masterful, fair-headed and strong ....» (These examples occur within the space of a single page). His peculiar, and sometimes erroneous, use of the word 'sombre,' for which he evinces a rather tiresome predilection, is also more in accordance with French habits of speech: — »those two incomprehensible and sombre outcasts,» »the sombre gracefulness of the straight figure,» »the big sombre-looking tree,» »it seemed to him that he was peering into a sombre hollow,» »he looked ... into the sombre brilliance of the night,» »it was a sombre creek of black water speckled with gold,» »that low and sombre reed-hut,» »the sombre covers of books soiled, grimy, but stiff-backed,» etc. A slip like the following does not surprise one in a writer familiar from infancy with the French language, but as yet unpractised in the literary use of English: — »he stood aspiring in his nostrils the acrid smell of the blue smoke.»

Other blunders, whether of grammar or vocabulary, bear witness to the same inexpertness in the handling of a difficult instrument; thus, the improper use of articles or pronouns: — »they could look at eternity reflected on the element that gave the life and dealt the death,» »She would try to cling to him always — all the life!» »I believe she has lost the little wits she had,» »Will he forgive me? The poor, innocent man.» »He saw it — the sure death — everywhere.» »'Give me this,' he said, stretching his hand towards the revolver .... 'Give me this revolver,' said Willems, in a peremptory tone.» At other times he will mix up one idiom with another or puzzle his readers with some odd incongruity of phrasing: — »I used to take there books — pamphlets,» — »she scrambled up with difficulty to her feet,» »she stopped dead short,» »He drank again, and shuddered with a depraved sense of pleasure at the after-time of slime in the water.» In some few cases, the author's deficient familiarity with the mechanism of the language has actually resulted in a style of writing of so curiously awkward a character as to make us hesitate to give it the name of English: — »... Willems pulled himself up in his headlong rush and moved forward with a moderate gait. He paced stiffly, looking with extreme exactitude at Lingard's face, ... that white-haired, rough and severe head,» etc. Or again: — »Ali was clearing the table. He dropped negligently the tumbler into the greasy dish, flung there the spoon and fork, then slipped in the plate with a push amongst the remnants of food. He took up the dish, tucked up the bottle under his armpit, and went off.»

It may be observed, with regard to these and similar inadvertencies, that while there is certainly little merit in originality achieved at the cost of violation of the

written or unwritten laws of a language, the importance of such things is easily exaggerated, and that (as somebody once remarked) »the incompetent can always be correct.» Bearing in mind the dimensions of Conrad's work, — it comprises some seven thousand 8vo pages, — what is astonishing is, not that so voluminous a mass of writing includes some grammatical errors or peculiarities of vocabulary or word-grouping, due to the fact of the author being a foreigner, but that these peculiarities and errors are not more numerous or more detrimental to the aesthetic effect of the whole. Moreover, they nearly all of them belong to the initial period, being practically absent in his later prose, where instances of slipshod or faulty English like the following are mere exceptions: — »The cells and casements [misprint for casemates?] of the castle . . . had been already filled with prisoners.» »I do not remember now the details of the weight and length of the fetters riveted on his limbs by an 'Administrative' order, but it was in the number of pounds and the thickness of links an appalling assertion of the divine right of autocracy.» »That extraordinary hallucined, anguished, and absent expression . . . .» »It was always the ship . . . that has been the stage for the exercise of seamen's primitive virtues.»

As for the author himself, it may well be that, looking back on past achievements with a not unnatural pride, he is inclined to take a somewhat romantic view of what he is pleased to call, with an amusing reversal of terms, »his adoption by the genius of the English language.» Writing somewhere in rectification of a statement to the effect that his decision to use English as his literary medium was due to a deliberate choice between that language and French, he says: — »The truth of the matter is that my faculty to write in English is as natural

as any other aptitude with which I might have been born. I have a strange and overpowering feeling that it had always been an inherent part of myself. English was for me neither a matter of choice nor adoption. The merest idea of choice had never entered my head. And as to adoption — well, yes, there was adoption; but it was I who was adopted by the genius of the language, which directly I came out of the stammering stage made me its own so completely that its very idioms I truly believe had a direct action on my temperament and fashioned my still plastic character.» All this sounds plausible enough, although an attentive student of Conrad's early prose may venture to hold a somewhat different opinion as to how far his faculty to write in English was »natural» or not. There is, however, another side to the question which an implicit acceptance of the author's own point of view, as set forth in the passage just quoted, might induce us to disregard. The suggestion that Conrad's style has a foreign flavour about it does not necessarily refer to technicalities of phrasing or grammar, nor need it imply censure. It may simply mean that Conrad's treatment of English stands for something new and wonderful, something that was not in the language before him, that it conveys a sensation of beautiful and subtle strangeness, or that its inherent rhythmical strain is pleasingly, if vaguely, different from what an English ear is accustomed to.

This argument is urged in excellent terms by Mr. Curle: — »... there is a foreign element in the spirit and substance of Conrad's prose which does require analysis. That strange, exotic manner of regarding our language which is so evident in his earlier books is an instance. His treatment of our tongue is one of the most exciting adventures in the long annals of English litterature. And

it is exciting because of its profound originality. His music is not the mere enlargement of older English strains, it is a new music altogether — the romantic, mysterious, and thrilling music of another race. There is a Latin, harp-like rhythm about Conrad's prose which is intensely individual. Few people, I think, have realized the fundamental difference between Conrad's prose and all the prose of the English schools. For it is Conrad's mastery of the details of our language that hides from us the deep originality of his method.»

In its daring revelation of a strangely original temperament, then, Conrad's early prose, though betraying the author's labour with a technique as yet imperfectly mastered, is as full of significance and charm as the more chastened beauty and fluent ease of his later style. Viewed as a whole, it has to some extent the character of an experiment, of novice work; if judged by individual passages, it is perhaps more obviously stimulating, through its emotional intensity and fierce sensuous appeal, than anything he has written since. His first stories will be remembered, admired and studied, if for nothing else, as landmarks in the history of English descriptive prose. In things like the following his art achieves an early perfection of utterance that leaves behind it all similar attempts by other writers, and some of his own: —

The narrow creek was like a ditch: tortuous, fabulously deep; filled with gloom under the thin strip of pure and shining blue of the heaven. Immense trees soared up, invisible behind the festooned draperies of creepers. Here and there, near the glistening blackness of the water, a twisted root of some tall tree showed amongst the tracery of small ferns, black and dull, writhing and motionless, like an arrested snake. The short words of the paddlers reverberated loudly between the thick and sombre walls of vegetation. Darkness oozed out from between the trees, through the tangled maze of the creepers, from behind the great fantastic and unstirring leaves; the

darkness, mysterious and invincible; the darkness scented and poisonous of impenetrable forests.

No doubt prose like this may be described as a little cloying. But how saturated with atmosphere! How it visualizes things! How subtly musical! Compare it for a moment with the following passage, which forms the beginning of a story by another well-known depictor of tropical scenery, — Louis Becke, — and its haunting suggestiveness and rich sensuous beauty will be the more readily realized: —

A long sweeping curve of coast, fringed with tall plumed palms casting wavering shadows on the yellow sand as they sway and swish softly to the breath of the brave trade-wind that whistles through the thickly-verdured hummocks on the weather side of the island, to die away into soft breath as, after passing through the belt of cocoanuts, it faintly ripples the transparent depths of the lagoon, etc.

It cannot be pretended that in this unmelodious and straggling piece of writing there is much either to flatter the ear or to set our imagination astir. The distance from things like these to Conrad is indeed immeasurable; it is the distance that separates literature from journalism.

A research into the purely technical qualities of Conrad's style being outside the limits of the present study, attention may at least be called in passing to his handling of *one* of the elements of artistic prose, as shown in the following passage, the effect of which is very intimately bound up with the dexterous use of a pattern of delicately varied alliterations: — »The silence was profound; but it seemed full of noiseless phantoms, of things sorrowful, shadowy, and mute, in whose invisible presence the firm, pulsating beat of the two ship's chronometers ticking off steadily the seconds of Greenwich Time seemed to me a protection and a relief.«

The inconveniences attendant upon a style so strongly saturated with the writer's temperament and taste are not far to seek, and it cannot be asserted that Conrad has been altogether successful in avoiding them. His rhythms are apt to become a little heavy and languid, his sentences will now and then offend our sense of proportion by an agglomeration of unwieldy polysyllables, as in the following extract from »The Lagoon»: — »The ever-ready suspicion of evil, the gnawing suspicion that lurks in our hearts, flowed out into the stillness round him — into the stillness profound and dumb, and made it appear untrustworthy and infamous, like the placid and impenetrable mask of an unjustifiable violence. In that fleeting and powerful disturbance of his being the earth enfolded in the starlight peace became a shadowy country of inhuman strife, a battle-field of phantoms terrible and charming, august or ignoble, struggling ardently for the possession of our helpless hearts. An unquiet and mysterious country of inextinguishable desires and fears.» [1])

At other times a period will drag on into a loose-jointed string of prepositional phrases, with equal injury to sound and sense: — »He was the victim of his strange principles, of his continence, of his blind belief in himself, of his solemn veneration for the voice of his boundless ignorance.» (»An Outcast»). »And in her eyes there was the wonder and desolation of an animal that knows only suffering, of the incomplete soul that knows pain but knows not hope; that can find no refuge from the facts of life in the illusory conviction of its dignity, of an exalted destiny beyond; in the heavenly consolation of a belief in the momentous origin of its hate.» *(ibid.)*

[1]) An amusing and clever parody of Conrad's earliest manner will be found in Mr. Max Beerbohm's »A Christmas Garland.»

To be quite just, however, it must be admitted that these instances of imperfect construction or clumsy phrasing are found almost exclusively in the writer's earlier work, and that the examples quoted are among the very worst. With each successive story these particular blemishes grow less frequent and finally disappear almost entirely. In his later stories, however, there are again things that lend some colour of truth to the opinion that the peculiarities of Conrad's style are apt to bewilder his readers and frequently spoil the effect of his narrative. Let me give, to make the point clear, the following two quotations from »The Arrow of Gold«: —

I was as much of a stranger as the most hopeless castaway stumbling in the dark upon a hut of natives and finding them in the grip of some situation appertaining to the mentalities, prejudices, and problems of an undiscovered country — of a country of which he had not even had one single clear glimpse before. It was even worse in a way. It ought to have been more disconcerting. For, pursuing the image of the castaway blundering upon the complications of an unknown scheme of life, it was I, the castaway, who was the savage, the simple innocent child of nature. Those people were obviously more civilized than I was. They had more rites, more ceremonies, more complexity in their sensations, more knowledge of evil, more varied meanings to the subtle phrases of their language.

She was beautifully animated now. In her motionless blue eyes like melted sapphires, around those red lips that almost without moving could breathe enchanting sounds into the world, there was a play of light, that mysterious ripple of gaiety that seemed always to run and faintly quiver under her skin even in her gravest moods; just as in her rare moments of gaiety its warmth and radiance seemed to come to one through infinite sadness, like the sunlight of our life hiding the invincible darkness in which the universe must work out its impenetrable destiny.

In neither of these passages is there a single touch to suggest anything but the hand of an experienced

writer; not a word that is used in an unfamiliar or, still less, inaccurate sense; the structure of the sentences is beyond reproach. Yet the impression of the whole is deceptive. One has a curious sensation of being trifled with, of being treated to a new and distinguished variety of hair-splitting. The thing is not real somehow, and one doesn't believe in it. No doubt it all partakes of that general air of refined and poetic vagueness which the author has evidently wished to impart to his story, but that is not the point. The point is that, there being a limit to the things that can at all be expressed by means of words, a writer may fail by over-subtlety and allusiveness, no less than by an excessive regard for the advantages to be derived from a »natural« and straightforward mode of utterance. By endeavouring to capture evanescent shades of emotion and feeling for which even a modern, highly articulate language like English has hardly an equivalent, or in trying to render which it is bound to lose proportionately in force and clearness, the style of the passages just quoted undoubtedly marks an unfavourable tendency.

It would be ungenerous, however, to dwell on imperfections which are of interest only in so far as they indicate the limitations of a very admirable artist. Let us turn to what is attractive and excellent in Conrad's prose; to what it has of sheer loveliness of melody, of rich suggestiveness, of point, of wit. Let us again consider some particularly engaging passage that seems to us to embody more faithfully or more eloquently than any other some distinguishing mood or attitude.

There is Razumov, tramping the snow-carpeted streets of the great city, alone with his dreadful secret; and as he moves on, the vision of his immense country in the brooding stillness of the winter night, its multitudes of

lives, its obscure sufferings and vague longings, its unfathomable future, rises before the troubled gaze of his mind: —

Razumov stamped his foot — and under the soft carpet of snow felt the hard ground of Russia, inanimate, cold, inert, like a sullen and tragic mother hiding her face under a winding-sheet — his native soil! — his very own — without a fireside, without a heart!

He cast his eyes upwards and stood amazed. The snow had ceased to fall, and now, as if by a miracle, he saw above his head the clear black sky of the northern winter, decorated with the sumptuous fires of the stars. It was a canopy fit for the resplendent purity of the snows.

Razumov received an almost physical impression of endless space and of countless millions.

He responded to it with the readiness of a Russian who is born to an inheritance of space and numbers. Under the sumptuous immensity of the sky, the snow covered the endless forests, the frozen rivers, the plains of an immense country, obliterating the landmarks, the accidents of the ground, levelling everything under its uniform whiteness, like a monstrous blank page awaiting the record of an inconceivable history.

Or we think of Mrs. Travers, setting out with Lingard in his little boat on a starless, windy night, her mind yet uncertain in its grasp of the absurd situation she has been forced to play a part in, seeking refuge from its perplexity, its doubts, its fatigue, in a mood of exquisite self-surrender: —

A roller had broken amongst the shoals; the livid clearness Lingard had seen ahead flashed and flickered in expanded white sheets much nearer to the boat now. And all this — the wan burst of light, the faint shock as of something remote and immense falling into ruins, was taking place outside the limits of her life which remained encircled by an impenetrable silence. Puffs of wind blew about her head and expired; the sail collapsed, shivered audibly, stood full and still in turn; and again the sensation of vertiginous speed and of absolute immobility succeeding each other with increasing swiftness

merged at last into a bizarre state of headlong motion and profound peace. The darkness enfolded her like the enervating caress of a sombre universe. It was gentle and destructive. Its languor seduced her soul into surrender. Nothing existed and even all her memories vanished into space. She was content that nothing should exist.

It may be questioned whether it is not in these and in similar passages — in the minute and leisurely interpretation of the complex moods of a character — that Conrad's subtlety of verbal expression achieves its greatest triumph. It is an art all of shades and innuendoes, in trying to capture which the reader may sometimes come to doubt his own sense of the reality of things. Have we not seen the author waste his acumen and his skill in an elaborate attempt at rendering imperceptible or futile niceties of feeling and spoil the makings of a fine story through an excessive regard for nuances and distinctions? But it is an art, too, which, when practised by a master's hand in a moment of perfect inspiration, has given us things like the following: —

»The commonest sort of fortitude prevents us from becoming criminals in a legal sense; it is from weakness unknown, but perhaps suspected, as in some parts of the world you suspect a deadly snake in every bush — from weakness that may lie hidden, watched or unwatched, prayed against or manfully scorned, repressed or maybe ignored more than half a lifetime, not one of us is safe. We are snared into doing things for which we get called names, and things for which we get hanged, and yet the spirit may well survive, — survive the condemnation, survive the halter, by Jove! And there are things — they look small enough sometimes too — by which some of us are totally and completely undone.« (»Lord Jim«).

Or this: —

»It is when we try to grapple with another man's intimate need that we perceive how incomprehensible, wavering, and misty are the beings that share with us the sight of the stars and the warmth of

the sun. It is as if loneliness were a hard and absolute condition of existence; the envelope of flesh and blood on which our eyes are fixed melts before the outstretched hand, and there remains only the capricious, unconsolable, and elusive spirit that no eye can follow, no hand can grasp.» *(ibid.).*

Or yet this: —

»He did not tell me what it was he said when at last he recovered his voice. I don't suppose he could be very eloquent. The world was still, the night breathed on them, one of those nights that seem created for the sheltering of tenderness, and there are moments when our souls, as if freed from their dark envelope, glow with an exquisite sensibility that makes certain silences more lucid than speeches.» *(ibid.).*

Any reader of Conrad will remember some of those numerous passages that give such eloquent utterance to his love of the sea, to the everlasting fascination of her mystery, her strength and her greatness. Let me quote, for a change, another passage of a later date, setting forth a different aspect of his sentiments: —

The sea is uncertain, arbitrary, featureless, and violent. Except when helped by the varied majesty of the sky, there is something inane in its serenity and something stupid in its wrath, which is endless, boundless, persistent, and futile — a grey, hoary thing raging like an old ogre uncertain of its prey. Its very immensity is wearisome. At any time within the navigating centuries mankind might have addressed it with the words: »What are you, after all? Oh, yes, we know. The greatest scene of potential terror, a devouring enigma of space. Yes. But our lives have been nothing if not a continuous defiance of what you can do and what you may hold; a spiritual and material defiance carried on in our plucky cockleshells on and on beyond the successive provocations of your unreadable horizons.» (»Notes on Life and Letters»).

Again, what English author has voiced his belief in mankind's invincible courage, endurance and pride in

nobler words than Conrad? I have quoted an admirable example from »Typhoon;» the following one may be given as a not unworthy counterpart: —

When the last aqueduct shall have crumbled to pieces, the last airship fallen to the ground, the last blade of grass have died upon a dying earth, man, indomitable by his training in resistance to misery and pain, shall set this undiminished light of his eyes against the feeble glow of the sun. (»Notes on Life and Letters»).

Conrad's mastery of descriptive narration has been amply dealt with in the foregoing; another much-admired passage may be included here, as equally significant of the author's keen responsiveness to the phenomena of nature and his power of visualization: —

»And this is how I see the East. I have seen its secret places and have looked into its very soul; but now I see it always from a small boat, a high outline of mountains, blue and afar in the morning; like faint mist at noon; a jagged wall of purple at sunset. I have the feel of the oar in my hand, the vision of a scorching blue sea in my eyes. And I see a bay, a wide bay, smooth as glass and polished like ice, shimmering in the dark. A red light burns far off upon the gloom of the land, and the night is soft and warm. We drag at the oars with aching arms, and suddenly a puff of wind, a puff faint and tepid and laden with strange odours of blossoms, of aromatic wood, comes out of the still night, — the first sigh of the East on my face. That I can never forget. It was impalpable and enslaving, like a charm, like a whispered promise of mysterious delight. (»Youth»).

I do not know whether attention has been called anywhere to Conrad's remarkably apt use of metaphors. Yet it is a fact that Conrad's similes and metaphors, while imparting to his diction a constant element of variety and beauty, of charm or wit, count for not a little in the singular freshness and neatness with which the events and the characters are presented to the

reader. I cannot do better than subjoin a few quotations: —

in the still night bats flitted in and out of the boughs like fluttering flakes of denser darkness.

the silence became so profound that the clear tinkle of a teaspoon falling on the tesselated floor of the veranda rang out like a tiny and silvery scream.

All that night Lingard had talked with Hassim while the stars streamed from east to west like an immense river of sparks above their heads.

He raised his hand deliberately to his face, and made picking motions with his fingers as though he had been bothered with cobwebs.

The sharp glance, coming from that massive body, gave a notion of extreme efficiency, like a razor-edge on a battleaxe.

her quick, black eyes, which just miss being lustrous, as if someone had breathed on them lightly.

a hint of spectral alarm . . . lurked in the blank glitter of his glance, resembling a nondescript form of a terror crouching silently behind a pane of glass.

there is hardly a woman in the world . . . in whom something of the maternal instinct does not survive, unconsumed like a salamander, in the fires of the most abandoned passion.

However, perhaps the most striking aspect of this aptitude for perceiving resemblances is the way it modifies and enriches the expression of the author's humour, — or shall we say rather, of his irony? For it is a humour pointed with sarcasm, slightly insidious behind its air of dispassionate attention to mere fact, — an exquisite poking fun at things, which reminds one again a little of that other master of the genre, Anatole France. If

we remember this or that character in some particular situation, more than in any other, or — as in the case of certain minor figurants — we remember them at all, it is often because some drolly exaggerated metaphor has once brought their image before our mind's eye in a startlingly life-like fashion. Thus with little Fyne, the pedestrian, in »Chance»: — »He skipped wildly out of the way [of a pair of cart-horses] and up on the curb-stone with a purely instinctive precision; his mind had nothing to do with his movements. In the middle of his leap, and while in the act of sailing gravely through the air, he continued to relieve his outraged feelings.» The whole man is there, — his trained vigour of muscle, his unruffled solemnity and lack of humour, his unimaginative methodicalness. And so, again, with Peter Ivanovitch, in »Under Western Eyes,» — »the noble arch-priest of Revolution»: — »He seized her hand in his thick cushioned palm, and put his other big paw over it like a lid.» It is but a line; yet those who know the story will read it with amused recognition, for it brings again before their mental vision the huge, bespectacled tom-cat, cynical, unctuous, vaguely patronizing, — »Europe's greatest feminist.» Or there are Marlow and the Frenchman at their leave-taking in the Sydney café: — »I had risen too, and, trying to throw infinite politeness into our attitudes, we faced each other mutely, like two china dogs on a mantelpiece.» Or why do we remember Robinson — »the notorious Robinson» — in »Lord Jim»? Because we happen to have seen the *vieille canaille* at the corner of some sun-baked Eastern street, propped on his umbrella, »as patient and still as a worn-out cab-horse.» Why is Versoy, the poet, in »The Arrow of Gold,» just a little more than a name to us? Because the accident of his distinguished baldheadedness

suggested an amusing bon mot to some casual observer: — »He is a spiteful, gingery little wretch. The top of his head shines like a billiard ball. I believe he polishes it every morning with a cloth.»

Let me give in conclusion a few specimens of Conrad's gift of humorous portraiture from the work which more perfectly than any other exhibits the diversity of his genius — »Nostromo,» — in which the fanaticism and intolerance of political warfare, as impersonated by certain ambiguous champions of Democracy and Progress, are satirized with drastic effect. Among the *fine fleur* of Costaguana, statesmen or strategists, filling that distant and fantastic scene with the éclat of their eloquence, their civic virtues or their warlike exploits, let the reader feast his eyes once more on worthies like General Barrios, a military celebrity of uncertain luck in the field, but whom his soldiers liked for his humane temper, »which was like a strange and precious flower unexpectedly blooming on the hotbed of corrupt revolutions»; or Señor Gamacho, the ex-pedlar appointed Commander of the National Guards, whose oratorical performances in the glaring heat of the Plaza suggested »the uncouth howlings of an inferior sort of devil cast into a white-hot furnace»; or his Excellency Don Pedro Montero, the »Liberator»: — »Pedrito Montero surprised one at first sight by the vast development of his bald forehead, a shiny yellow expanse between the crinkly coal-black tufts of hair without any lustre, the engaging form of his mouth, and an unexpectedly cultivated voice. But his eyes, very glistening as if freshly painted on each side of his hooked nose, had a round, hopeless, birdlike stare when opened fully. Now, however, he narrowed them agreeably, throwing his square chin up and speaking with closed teeth slightly through the nose, with what

he imagined to be the manner of a grand seigneur.» Or, last not least, that creature of unholy fascination, General Montero, the brother, — an impressionist study of weirdly comic effect, dashed off in a happy mood of grotesque invention: — »On one side, General Montero, his bald head covered now by a plumed cocked hat, remained motionless on a skylight seat, a pair of big gauntleted hands folded on the hilt of the sabre standing upright between his legs. The white plume, the coppery tint of his broad face, the blue-black of the moustaches under the curved beak, the mass of gold on sleeves and breast, the high shining boots with enormous spurs, the working nostrils, the imbecile and domineering stare of the glorious victor of Rio Seco had in them something ominous and incredible; the exaggeration of the cruel caricature, the fatuity of solemn masquerading, the atrocious grotesqueness of some military idol of Aztec conception and European bedecking, awaiting the homage of worshippers.»

Like most great writers Conrad has been variously judged, a considerable number of critics and reviewers having brought their individual partialities or prejudices to bear on a work varying in itself and, in one sense, elusive in the extreme. Of these estimates some were penetrating enough, while others were as manifestly wide of the mark — so much so that the author has more than once felt called upon to protest against erroneous notions concerning himself or the origin of his stories. The numerous misunderstandings relating to the influence of the writer's personal experiences on his authorship, arising as often as not from inexact information about the former, need not occupy us here, any

more than those blunders for which there is no other excuse than the mentality of their perpetrators. These deductions made, however, it cannot be denied that Conrad is an embarrassing subject to deal with — in spite of his efforts to make things easier for the student and biographer by discoursing very freely about himself and his art. And the difficulty entailed by the study of his writings lies of course in the exceptional character of those writings themselves — in their cosmopolitanism, in their amazing wealth of forms and of inspiration, in their apparent lack of intrinsic unity, in the fact of their conjoining so many various elements.

There is the conjunction of language and temperament, unseizable and subtle in its bearings, yet always felt somehow by the attentive and sensitive reader, and colouring every page of his writing. To pretend to regard Conrad as having made himself independent, even in his style, of his foreign temperament, is a delusion involving all sorts of misapprehensions. His artistic medium is English, true enough, but the genius reflected in it is not the English genius. The effect of strangeness sometimes produced upon English readers by Conrad's prose is simply the unconscious reaction against the indefinably foreign flavour of that prose.

There is the conjuntion of Life and Letters, the importance of which has perhaps been exaggerated, in so far as a not inconsiderable portion of Conrad's work bears no obvious or necessary relation to the author's knowledge of the sailor's life or to his sojourn in the Far East. Still it remains a fact of overshadowing significance in his development as a writer and artist. The great revelation of the Sea gave him the first impetus to writing and furnished him with magnificent and varied material for his stories; for long years the

sea was the paramount influence and source of inspiration of his literary life. Whenever he writes about the sea, he is eloquent, convincing, sure of himself, and keeps us spellbound by the living truth of his evocations. When outside that sphere, he not infrequently loses his hold upon our imagination. In all his stories, but especially in those of the sea, there are scenes, episodes, characters, that impress us by their stong suggestion of actuality and life, and behind which we divine the thrill of a personal experience, the memory of an authentic emotion.

But the very fact of Conrad's life entering so largely into his books is also the reason of the somewhat limited appeal of those books, of their slightly bewildering or irritating effect on a certain class of reader. Many of them take us among strange peoples and customs, to unlikely, far-off places of the earth; a few of them deal extensively with professional occupations and interests and demand, to be fully enjoyed and savoured, not so much a special initiation or knowledge as an amount of curiosity and imagination perhaps beyond what may be expected from the average novel-reader. And then it cannot be denied: the intensity with which Conrad recalls and lives in his own past, the absorbing interest to himself of all that belongs to it, — these tend also directly to impair the form of his narration, depriving it of simplicity and clearness, and often of logical unity. There must not have been a few readers in their time who let themselves be deterred from a renewal of their acquaintance with Conrad's books on account of their complicated method of construction. One cannot help the reflection that a more constant exertion of self-restraint and a more rigorous pruning would have added to the artistic effect of some of the longer stories without encroaching upon their vital interest.

There is the conjunction of Realism and Romance, in which resides perhaps the ultimate secret of Conrad's greatness as an imaginative artist. And here the critic will ask himself, a little anxiously: does not »The Arrow of Gold,» perhaps also the treatment of the love-theme in »The Rescue,» rather confirm the apprehensions formulated as follows, some five years ago, by one of his critics: — »The conclusion of »Chance» and certain tales in his volume »Within the Tides» make one wonder whether that alliance between romance and realism that he has hitherto so wonderfully maintained is not breaking down before the baleful strength of the former of these two qualities»? It may be added that, even apart from extreme cases like those just quoted, the subtlety of Conrad's psychology obviously places him beyond the reach of the common devourer of fiction, on whom his minute analyses will be thrown away no less infallibly than the deliberate refinements of a style at once rich and high-wrought. His treatment of character not infrequently presents difficulties even to readers of experience and a trained faculty of observation. He has the Slav passion for going deeper and ever deeper into the intricacies of a sentimental or moral dilemma. Captain Anthony, Lingard (in »The Rescue»), Jim in his second phase, may serve as examples; none of them (as somebody has finely pointed out) »belongs to the whole world, nor do they escape the limitations and confinements that their presentation as 'cases' involves on them.» Undoubtedly »The Arrow of Gold» sounds a note of warning, showing the dangers of further advance along a line marked by an increasing proneness to elusiveness and quibbling.

There is, lastly, the conjunction of Philosophy and Fiction. There can be no doubt that, if certain of Conrad's

longer stories would seem to enjoy but scant popularity, the reason is mainly that those stories are to a considerable extent made up, not of incidents, but of talk about incidents, — and of talk which is little better than »caviare to the general.» The habitués of circulating libraries are not in favour of too pronounced a bias for speculativeness in their purveyors of amusement. And in the cases just alluded to this comparative lack of fervour is not entirely without foundation. It cannot be denied that, especially in »Jim,» the philosophizings of Marlow are allowed a somewhat generous scope, and that even that eloquent and shrewd commentator on the weaknesses and follies of his fellow-men is apt to become — *tranchons le mot!* — somewhat of a bore. On the other hand, it is obvious that to those readers on whose discerning appreciation his fame as an author chiefly rests, Conrad's strongly intellectual bent, so far from detracting from his charm, is but an additional element of interest. For readers of that kind demand of their novelist not only pleasurable emotions, not only a quickened sense of life, but a clear and reasoned conception of the dozen or so problems which most intimately affect a modern man or woman. And this Conrad gives them, — as surely as he has opened new vistas of beauty to their imaginative vision, as he has made them acquainted with a marvellously widened range of characters, and as his handling of language provides them with delights such as cannot be experienced in converse with any other English writer.

In the very refinement and rareness of his gifts, in the unusual and complex character of his writings, we must, then, seek for the partial explanation of Conrad's peculiar position among contemporary novelists — as a man at once obscure and famous. For notwithstanding

that his books command a large and increasing sale and meet with a flattering reception at the hands of those critics whose words carry authority, Conrad is not really what is called a popular novelist — popular, that is, in the sense in which writers like Sir Hall Caine or Mr. William Locke are popular. More than twenty-five years after the appearance of his first book, it probably still holds good that »a large number of intelligent and well-read persons have never heard his name.» (Phelps, »The Advance of the English Novel,» 1916). For all the commendations of rapt reviewers, even to-day to love and appreciate Conrad is something of a distinguished privilege of the literary few.

Now what makes the case somewhat complicated is that even among the latter Conrad is by no means always a favourite, as everybody may persuade himself by a simple enquête among his friends. There can be no doubt that his first critic and biographer was justified in saying that »some people of intelligence are quite hostile to Conrad» — for reasons more or less identical with those stated above, in explanation of the comparative reserve of the general public. He appears to arouse, in certain minds, a »temperamental antagonism.» On others, he puts too hard a strain of imaginative sympathy. Some readers are repelled by his irony and pessimism, or by the often gruesome character of his subjects, or by both. Others are apt to find fault with his language as not lucid enough, or dislike his treatment of love-problems, which is unconventional and unsentimental. To yet others his stories, although full of chequered incident and imagined with a view to intense dramatic effect, will be spoilt by their — supposed or real — abstruseness or their tendency to psychological delving.

The fact is that Conrad is pre-eminently a writer for

a certain type of reader whose attitude may be defined as at the same time speculative and realistic, for natures capable alike of the artist's delight in novelty and beauty and of the man of the world's curiosity in the passions of living men and women. The very real success of his books testifies to the strength of his appeal to this particular section of the public, who will love him none the less sincerely for some of those very imperfections that make them hesitate, perhaps, to rank him with the very greatest.

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